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A Reporter at Large

- [The Promise and the Politics of Rewilding India]

By Dorothy Wickenden

On May 12, 1459, the Rajput warrior ruler Rao Jodha laid the first foundation stone of an impregnable fort, atop a jagged cliff of volcanic rock in the Thar Desert of Marwar. He called the citadel Mehrangarh, or “fort of the sun”—and, legend has it, he insured a propitious future by ordering a man buried alive on its grounds. Over time, as the royal clan secured its power, the compound grew to colossal proportions, with soaring battlements, ornately furnished palaces, and grand courtyards enclosed by intricate sandstone latticework. Four hundred feet below, the capital city of Jodhpur became a flourishing trade center.

By the mid-twentieth century, when India gained independence from Britain, royal fortunes had fallen, and bats had moved into the premises. In the nineteen-seventies, the young maharaja began to restore the fort, to open it to the public. Curators filled galleries with artifacts from his collection. Today, visitors gaze at scimitars and armor, antique palanquins, silk brocades, and more than three thousand exquisitely detailed miniature paintings by Marwari artisans.

In 2005, Mahendra Singh, a member of the dynasty and the C.E.O. of the Mehrangarh Museum Trust, asked a man named Pradip Krishen if he could create a suitably arresting landscape around the fort—“greening” a hundred and seventy-five acres of stony ground. Virtually the only plant growing there was *Prosopis juliflora,* a ferociously invasive shrub from Central America, which Marwaris refer to as *baavlia*—“the mad one.” It survives on practically no nutrients or water, its branches bristle with thorns, and its leaves and roots emit poisonous alkaloids.

Krishen was not an obvious choice for the job. He was fifty-six years old, with no training in botany, ecology, geology, or landscape gardening. He had tried out several careers, with mixed success: as a journalist, a university lecturer in history, a TV documentarian, and an indie filmmaker on what he calls “the lunatic fringe.” He was six years into writing a book about the trees of Delhi, but he had designed only one small public garden, at the site of an even more ancient fort to the north of Mehrangarh. Looking back, Krishen seemed astonished that he said yes. “What arrogance!” he said as we drove across Rajasthan in September.

To work through how he might approach the undertaking, Krishen wrote Singh a "concept note." It wouldn't be a tidy garden or a forest, and it would be green only four months of the year, around the monsoon season. He suggested that they call it an "ecological restoration" project, a term, he explained professorially, that described "the procedures by which people study a habitat, and then attempt to restore it to an original state (either inferred or intuited)." Singh seemed a little baffled, but in a leap of faith he got the board to agree.

Krishen's first task was to remove the *Prosopis*. It had sent long roots into fissures in the rock—following its habit, he wrote, of seeking out "inhospitable places, where it hunkers down and digs itself in." To "grub out" the plants, he hired fifteen Jodhpuri miners, whose forebears had chiselled great blocks of pink sandstone for the walls of the fort. After three months of laborious chipping, the men had extracted *Prosopis* from about ten acres, leaving the area, Krishen noted, as perforated as "a piece of comic-book Swiss cheese." He sent out teams of donkeys and handlers with a soil mix packed into panniers. Locals mocked him, predicting failure. "I had a moment of doubt," he recalled. "What if whatever we plant doesn't work?" But, he told himself, "we could always put back the *Prosopis*."

Rao Jodha Desert Rock Park opened in 2011. Late one afternoon during my visit, when the blistering heat had relented a bit, Krishen showed me around. A trim, wide-shouldered man of seventy-three, he has curly gray hair, a clipped beard, and round glasses that slip down his nose. He led me through a rebuilt seventeenth-century stone archway in the original city wall, with wooden gates painted pale teal—the color of some of his favorite desert plants.

Inside was a display of circular raised beds filled with pebbles and soil particular to various desert habitats, containing dozens of striking plants, many still bearing bright blooms. More than two hundred species of trees, shrubs, climbers, herbs, grasses, and sedges now grow in the park, "an outdoor museum," Krishen calls it, "of Marwar's lithophytes—plants specially adapted to living in rocky habitats." I stopped at a tall, tangled shrub with stems covered in extravagant downy flowers: bui, or desert cotton, which Rajasthanis sometimes use as fluff for pillows.

India, like much of the rest of the world, is in ecological tumult. Between 1880 and 2013, some forty per cent of its forest cover disappeared. It has lost a third of its wetlands in the past few decades, and a third of its grasslands in just a ten-year span. A fifth of its tree species may be threatened with extinction. Krishen's work has emerged as a showcase for restoring biodiversity to ravaged places—a practice known as ecological restoration, or, more colloquially, "rewilding." It is based not on industrial-scale quick-fix planting projects but on a near-fanatical attunement to the specifics of local ecosystems and the livelihoods of their people. Rewilders strive to undo some of the environmental damage inflicted over the centuries by humans—the most invasive species of all.

Krishen and I entered a narrow canyon, hewn by fifteenth-century miners from a solid cliff to channel runoff to two man-made lakes below. The trail opened to an expansive view of the fort, and of the park's many plants. They had euphonious common names: cowpea witchweed; heart-leaf indigo; googal (an endangered species used in Ayurvedic medicine to lower cholesterol); and thhor, a cactuslike succulent that forms in rounded clumps the size of tractor-trailers. Krishen chose thhor as the logo for the park, less for its beauty (although he does find it beautiful) than for its hospitality. He calls it a microhabitat, providing shade and protection for twenty-four smaller plants, and for vulnerable creatures such as rodents and lizards. Like the park, it is proof that the harshest places on earth can support multitudinous forms of life.

As we finished our walk, Krishen spotted a pioneer butterfly struggling to free itself from a spiderweb on a ragged mallow. He delicately removed the web and sat on a stone bench, pulling at the silk until the butterfly flew away. He likes to say that when you restore a landscape you "learn how to read the Book of Nature," an experience that he calls "one of the joys of my life."

Mehrangarh Fort, looming on the escarpment above us, figures in one of the creation stories of modern ecology. In 1730, the maharaja of Jodhpur needed wood for a new palace in the compound, so he sent soldiers to cut down khejri trees in the desert village of Khejarli. The trees are sacred to the Bishnoi people, and a villager led a protest by wrapping her arms around a trunk. The soldiers brutally broke up the demonstration, slitting the throats

of three hundred and sixty-three people. The protesters are said to have been India’s first environmental activists, giving rise to the term “tree-hugger.”

In September, some fifty of their modern-day successors gathered at the fort: members of a newly formed group called the Ecological Restoration Alliance of India. E.R.A.’s long-term goal is to fundamentally change how India’s citizens, industries, and governments interact with the environment. Its members include field biologists, ecologists, organic farmers, rain-forest and wetlands specialists, permaculture experts, a conservation geneticist, and a few enthusiasts just starting out. The group intends to be a catalyst, carrying out restoration projects and spreading information about best practices through public talks and open access to scientific papers. Krishen, who sits on the alliance’s steering committee, describes it as a “very small tribe,” but it is ambitious. Its Web site, referring to the many forces that are stripping India’s lands and contaminating its water, asks, “How can we not just *arrest* such trends, but *reverse* them?”

The United Nations, in yet another call to immediate action on the climate crisis, designated 2021-30 the “Decade on Ecosystem Restoration.” But there is no consensus on exactly how to enact repairs. The only thing everyone agrees on is the value of trees. They serve as carbon sinks, provide habitats and food, reduce water pollution, and prevent erosion. Still, some twenty-five million acres of forest are destroyed every year, by clear-cutting or fire, usually to make way for mines, grazing land, crops, and tree plantations, for timber, palm oil, and other products.



Rao Jodha Desert Rock Park showcases hundreds of plants adapted to arid conditions.

Most funding thus goes to guilt-absolving projects that promise to plant billions of trees—in the Amazon, the California redwood forests, the Sahel, and many of India's twenty-eight states. In January, 2020, the World Economic Forum announced an initiative to plant a trillion trees. Bank of America, Mastercard, Microsoft, and the National Forest Foundation, among others, declared their support. Conservation International and MyTrees, which plan to help restore seventy-three million trees in Brazil, urge, "*SAVE TREES, WIN PRIZES*: Get rewarded for helping the planet every month!" The media, looking for feel-good stories, has routinely broadcast such measures. A *National Geographic* headline announced, "India Plants 50 Million Trees in One Day, Smashing World Record."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi relishes such headlines. Developing nations like India are in an especially painful bind: coping with cascading environmental catastrophes while pursuing rapid industrial growth. Modi claims to have found a way to do both. At the U.N.'s 2019 climate summit, he pledged to restore sixty-four million acres of degraded land by 2030. He also oversees one of the world's fastest-growing economies. India will soon overtake China as the most populous nation, with more than 1.4 billion people. Although it contributes only seven per cent of global CO_2 emissions, it is the third-largest polluter, after China and the U.S. At present, seventy per cent of its electricity comes from coal. The government recently

predicted that India's demand for electricity would double in the next decade.

Modi's critics say that, in the rush to join the developed world, India is devastating the environment. Warnings from scientists are ignored, as dams, roads, and power lines are built in fragile habitats. In recent years, the Modi administration has taken steps to nullify the Forest Rights Act, which enabled Indigenous people and other forest dwellers to resist development projects in their homelands. A young participant at the E.R.A. conference described Modi's India to me as "development on steroids."

Attempting to replenish India's tree cover, Modi, like his predecessors, has invested heavily in "compensatory" planting. For the state forest departments that implement these plans, biodiversity is a relatively new concern; following colonial precedent, they have historically regarded native shrubs, grasses, and climbers as "weeds" or, worse, as "*junglee*." Under pressure to plant quickly and extensively, they install fast-growing, thirsty saplings, with little thought to whether they'll survive.

The success rate of such initiatives is low. One recent study, published in a Royal Society of London journal, examined a hundred and seventy-six sites in tropical and subtropical Asia. After five years, an average of forty-four per cent of the trees had died. In October, when the online journal Yale Environment 360 surveyed tree-planting efforts in the Philippines, Turkey, India, and elsewhere, it found that scientists described them as poorly designed and mismanaged at best. Often, they "fail to grow any forests at all."

E.R.A. aims to provide alternatives to what it regards as "mindless tree planting programmes." It also contends with another rewilding approach: the trend of planting "tiny forests." The practice began in the nineteen-seventies, when a Japanese botanist named Akira Miyawaki started creating small, tightly packed groves of native saplings, shrubs, and grasses, in carefully prepared soils. Admirers described dense forests that grew far more rapidly than natural ones.

Word caught on abroad, and Miyawaki was summoned to Malaysia, China, Italy, and Brazil. His forests, some no bigger than a tennis court, attracted

butterflies, bees, and birds, and provided islands of shade and quiet in ever-hotter, more congested cities. In 2008, he was in Bengaluru to create a plot at a Toyota plant. A young engineer there, Shubhendu Sharma, planted a Miyawaki grove in his own back yard, and soon became one of India's most successful proselytizers for the method. He quit his job, started a company devoted to Miyawaki forests, and gave *TED* talks in which he discussed corporate social responsibility and outlined a method that could create a hundred-year forest in just ten years.

Miyawaki's cardinal rule resembles one that guides E.R.A.: carefully study soil needs and habitat, and use a selection of local plants. India, though, has relatively few native-plant nurseries, and, as Modi pledged to plant millions of trees, businesses and cities introduced tiny forests helter-skelter. Scientists note that the groves often require earthmovers, truckloads of fresh soil, and —for the first few years—weeding, manuring, and copious watering, in regions where water is scarce. There are not yet any hard data proving these forests' long-term survival rates in India.

At the conference, people who have spent decades in the field, mostly with small nonprofits, gave presentations on their challenges and accomplishments. One has worked with local communities to restore six thousand acres of agricultural land. Another turned an old cement quarry into an eco-park, creating a template for industrial land reclamation. A third works with residents and local leaders to restore hilly wetlands in Tamil Nadu, where the flow of water had turned sluggish and foul. Wetlands, like deserts, have historically been dismissed as wasteland, and the area was filled with garbage and invasive plants. The group removed all of that, and planted native sedges, grasses, climbers, and trees. Within a year, drinkable water had begun to flow again.


In the Anaimalai Hills, enormous gaur move between tea estates and patches of rain forest.

These kinds of ideas, built on deep understanding of individual environments, aren't as easy to implement as mass interventions. But ecologists argue that, especially in a place with as many ecosystems as India, the only viable response to the climate crisis is a patchwork of effective local solutions. Native plants, Krishen points out, have evolved over millions of years "to feel at home with *that* particular kind of soil and its microbes, *that* moisture regime, *that* climate, *those* particular rhythms of the seasons."

Restoration ecologists have struggled to frame this vision so that it can compete for the attention of governing bodies and big donors. "Coming up with a common story has not been easy," Nitin Pandit, the former director of the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment, who is not a member of the alliance, told me. "But if it's narrated correctly by N.G.O.s, taking in other stakeholders and actors, and the government doesn't pay attention, it's missing out on the opportunity of a lifetime."

In a talk that Krishen gave at the conference, he put it more urgently. Anticipating a run on arable land in the next decade, he said, "Rising populations, extreme weather events, dropping productivity of land—all will contribute to food insecurity. I'm saying, let's get ready for it."

After the conference, Krishen gave me a ride from Jodhpur to New Delhi, a distance of three hundred and sixty-five miles, with a stop in Jaipur to visit a different kind of desert-restoration project he'd taken on. Before leaving Mehrangarh Fort, he got a bag of dog biscuits from his truck, offering one as a parting gift to a favorite stray, Bavekoof—Urdu for "without any sense."

Krishen's facial expression hovers between quizzical and sardonic when discussing human follies, but turns tender as he talks about his family (which includes four dogs and two cats) or a plant he is particularly fond of. He grew up comfortably in the diplomatic neighborhood of New Delhi, where his father, Prem, worked in the civil service. His mother, Vimla, came from a modest background, but had high aspirations for Pradip and his two sisters. He fondly calls her "a bit of a Jewish mother."

As a young man, Krishen was considered an "odd bod"—a misfit. He did his undergraduate work in Delhi, and, in the late sixties, went to Balliol College, Oxford, for a degree in history. He returned a "Bolshie" radical, obsessed with New Wave films and the Beatles. He recalls that Prem was quietly furious, and that "Mummy was also disappointed in me—I wasn't going to be an ambassador."

He married his college girlfriend, Sonu Davar, and they lived in an apartment in his parents' house. Sonu worked in the theatre, and Krishen, after teaching for several years, began producing television documentaries for a popular science program: on moon rocks, how animals communicate, the social life of honeybees.

After three years, Krishen said, that "wasn't fun anymore." In 1980, he won first prize—ten thousand rupees—in a script competition held by the National Film Development Corporation. The screenplay, based on a novel by the Irish writer Joyce Cary, became his first feature film, "Massey Sahib." Set in 1930 in a small town in British India, it centers on a young typist in a district magistrate's office, who expects a fine career simply because he speaks English and works for a respected official. Krishen found the perfect filming location deep in the jungle: Pachmarhi, the former summer capital of the Central Provinces. When he was casting the female lead, a tribal girl who marries Massey, Sonu introduced him to a colleague: a

shy twenty-two-year-old architect with no acting experience named Arundhati Roy.

Krishen frequently interrupted his narrative to be sure I was paying attention to the scenery. We passed small farms growing maize, bajra (a black millet used for flour), and guar (which produces a gum useful in processed food and explosives). Much of the landscape, though, was sand and rocks, speckled with stunted scrub, wispy wild grasses, and occasional solitary trees. It looked pretty desolate, but he made me see it as he did—a place that could sustain life of all kinds. Years earlier, he'd noticed distinctive plant formations in the desert, and begun asking local people what the shrubland was called. He finally found a man who told him it was known as Roee. Ever since, Krishen has been trying to make the word known: "If you name it, you put something in people's minds." He cited similar eco-regions—the Namib ("vast place") of southern Africa, the chaparral of California and Mexico—and said, "They're all shrublands that are admired and conserved."

As we drove, Krishen touched lightly on painful chapters of his past: he and Sonu separated in 1982, and she died three years later, of a probable brain hemorrhage. His parents helped to raise their young daughters, Pia and Mithva.

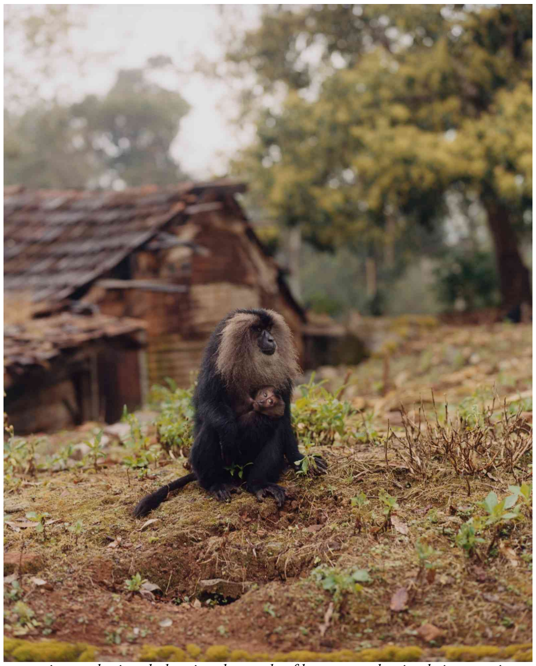
After Arundhati Roy's star turn in "Massey Sahib," Krishen began collaborating with her on films: he directed, she wrote and acted. Roy moved in with him, and in 1993 they were married. Their films—"In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones," based on Roy's experiences as an architecture student, and "Electric Moon," about a fading royal family who own a jungle resort—won a few awards and developed a cult following, but they didn't make any money. Krishen was stuck. He hated working with the National Film Development Corporation, and he couldn't see himself in Bollywood.

He left his girls at home with Roy and his parents, and began spending much of his time in Pachmarhi. He and an architect friend, Golak Khandual, built a house there, and every day they rambled through the jungle with a retired forester who taught them the names—English and Latin—of some fifty species of trees.

Eventually, Krishen was invited to a meeting, held by the state government, where development plans for Pachmarhi would be discussed. He began reading up on integrated conservation planning, and, in collaboration with an N.G.O. in Delhi, came up with a pitch. The state gave them a contract, but soon cancelled it and turned the task over to the Town and Country Planning Organisation. Krishen responded to the resulting plan with a critique that ran to a hundred and twenty pages. Others expressed similar objections, and the plan was soon scrapped.

While Krishen was having a midlife crisis, Roy was writing a masterpiece. Around the time that "Electric Moon" was finished, Britain's Channel 4 commissioned her to write a script. She dashed off a three-page treatment, about a single woman in Kerala bringing up her children within an extended family, but she wanted to pursue the idea as a novel. In 1996, Roy showed the completed manuscript to Krishen. He recalls being "completely bowled over." So were Roy's agent, publishers, and critics. The book, "The God of Small Things," was translated into more than forty languages, won the Booker Prize, and went on to sell six million copies. In Roy's acknowledgments, she describes Krishen as "my most exacting critic, my closest friend, my love."

For the first time in Krishen's adult life, money was not a worry. "I didn't need to look over my shoulder for the wolf at the door," he says. But, after spending most of three years in Pachmarhi, he was still at loose ends: "Arundhati has written her book. I go back to Delhi with nothing to show." That was the impetus for "Trees of Delhi." He confided in the preface that he'd been walking in the arid forest at the heart of the city, the Central Ridge, for nearly forty years, yet he knew very little about what grew there: "To my untrained eye, the Ridge was just a wild-looking place, with lots of thorny trees and bushes." His epiphany came in February, 1995, after the leaves had fallen. He made a note: "Every dry twig had sprouted a tiny, pale green affirmation that it was still alive." He was struck by the redemptive power of nature. Trees, he wrote, "are balm and salve to our mistakes."


For restoration ecologists, balancing the needs of humans and animals is a persistent challenge.

Immersing himself in research, he gathered information about the botanical and urban-planning history of Delhi, which has more than two thousand acres of forest. Writing does not come easily to Krishen. “I sweat blood,” he told me. It got harder in 2004, when he was given a diagnosis of tongue cancer, and went through chemo and radiation. Still, he’d decided, “this was what I wanted to do.”

“Trees of Delhi,” subtitled “A Field Guide,” describes the animating features of two hundred and fifty-two urban trees. Krishen took the photographs and fussed over an elaborate design, yet the tone is conversational and engaging. Because he’d been an amateur for so long, he could anticipate the kinds of questions ordinary readers would have: “Most tree flowers are *BISEXUAL*, with both male and female parts, and are known as *PERFECT FLOWERS*.” In the “Back of the Book,” he found a place for bits he couldn’t relinquish, including a few words about the planet’s biggest banyan. Situated in the village of Gotte Bayalu, it is about seven hundred years old, and capacious enough that twenty thousand people can stand in its shade.

The book was a best-seller in India. “Pradip was a rock star,” a friend told me. Excited readers began asking him to lead tours of the city’s trees. Once, a hundred and sixty people showed up, despite driving rain.

At the time, India's environmental movement was energized; an anti-logging crusade, led by village women in the nineteen-seventies, had been followed in the nineties by mass protests against an enormous dam that the government was building in Gujarat. Roy wrote in fierce support of the movement. Krishen's advocacy followed a different trajectory. (They parted amicably in 2010.) He spent years exploring a great swath of the country's forest lands, which led, in 2015, to his second book, "Jungle Trees of Central India," and to his work in restoration ecology.

As we drew closer to Jaipur, Krishen pointed out increasing numbers of khejri—the tree that the eighteenth-century protesters in Rajasthan had sacrificed themselves to save. "You hear it before you see it," he said, noting the buzz of bees that its flowers attract. "It's fantastic for their forage." The khejri is invaluable to desert people, too. In the Rajputana famine of 1869, they ground its bark to make flour, which kept them alive. The bark is still used to treat inflammation, bronchitis, dysentery, leprosy, and piles. Farmers feed their cattle with the leaves, which also make a rich compost. The seed pods, which resemble emaciated green beans when unripe, are a key ingredient in Rajasthani cuisine. Krishen told me, "You had some of them the other day in our lunch."

In January, 2016, as word spread about what Krishen had done at Rao Jodha, the Jaipur Development Authority asked if he would design a new park in town. Officials from the horticulture department took him out in a sleek white car, showing him parks that he might remake. Krishen, uninterested in designing ornamental gardens, asked, "Don't you have some untidy little corner of the city that's unravelling?"

They pulled into a ghostly place called Kishan Bagh. Amid a city of four million people, it consisted of a hundred and fifty-eight acres of bald hillocks and peaked dunes badly scarred by goat trails. The road leading in was being used as a dumping site. The horticulture office had attempted to create a large cactus garden, but the cacti had died. All that remained was a set of concrete stairs leading to weed-choked beds, surrounded by bricks, scrap iron, broken beer bottles, and plastic waste. To the officials' amazement, Krishen looked out at the dunes and remarked, "It's gorgeous. Now, *this* is something I'd love to work on."

Kishan Bagh Desert Park, completed in 2021, is sandy, not rocky, but it has Krishen's marks all over it. Joined by two dogs and three young naturalists trained in the Krishen method, we followed a picturesque winding boardwalk through tall grasses. A series of colorful billboards enticed visitors to learn "All About Roee," and noted, "The Thar Desert has something like 120 different kinds of native grasses!" Long overlooked in the global fanfare about trees, grasses are just beginning to get their due. Grasslands have extensive root systems, and store a greater proportion of their carbon underground than trees, which release carbon they've accumulated when they burn or rot. According to the Climate Trust, an Oregon-based nonprofit, grasses account for a fifth of the carbon stored in the world's soil; protecting this reserve, the trust says, is "by far the greatest natural climate solution besides reforestation."



In Delhi, much of the city's forest has been infested by Prosopis juliflora—a noxious invasive shrub sometimes called "the mad one."

Like all flora, grasses have an intimate, complex relationship with their terrain. In 2007, Krishen began to understand some of this, in part by observing bunches of *Oropetium* grass in Rao Jodha park, along with the peculiar hardened earth in which they grew. Scientists had been studying "biological soil crusts" for decades, but have only recently discovered just how much they aid deserts. Teeming with microscopic life, the crusts reduce soil erosion and increase its fertility, capturing nitrogen and carbon from the atmosphere and sharing them with other growing things.

While laying out Kishan Bagh, Krishen and his naturalists had pulled together hundreds of scattered rhizome clumps of *Saccharum spontaneum* and planted them around the park. They were pleasantly surprised: the *Saccharum*, which are usually associated with moist sites, settled in comfortably. Each year, for ten days after the rainy season, they form masses of silver-plumed pennants, stealing the show.

A small fringe-toed lizard with a blue tail flashed by. Krishen said, “They can’t move and breathe at the same time.” It was the kind of memorable detail that makes him an effective popularizer. In his books and his parks, he has synthesized several disciplines, describing the interplay of species, atmosphere, and microbes in lively, accessible terms. One wildlife scientist told me, of Krishen’s contribution to ecology, “He has expanded the scope of who can participate. Anyone who has a connection to the land can engage.”

His passion has proved contagious. In 2018, he met Somil Daga and Fazal Rashid, two millennials working at an organic-farming startup in Delhi. They had read “Trees of Delhi,” and become fanatic “tree-spotters,” but had only recently discovered restoration ecology. When a client asked them to rewild some two hundred acres in Rajasthan, they nervously turned to Krishen for advice.



“I’m you, from three days in the past. I think I’m going to buy a skateboard!”
Cartoon by Lonnie Millsap

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Not long after they met, Krishen asked Daga to be an apprentice at Rao Jodha. Daga, who is thirty, had trained as a mechanical engineer, and was still learning about plants. When I met him, he cheerfully admitted, “Four years ago, I didn’t know a tomato plant from a cucumber vine!” Now he is

the park's director, and speaks fluent rewilding: "Apart from bringing back birds and insects, a properly restored habitat will require almost no looking after at all. It is entirely self-sustaining. That is its beauty and magic!"

While Daga was starting out at Rao Jodha, Krishen asked Rashid, who'd initially pursued an editorial career at Penguin Random House in Delhi, to help him develop a twenty-five-acre wildflower meadow at a boarding school. Rashid still works with the organic-farming startup, and is establishing a native-plants nursery in Bhopal. He said, "Pradip's inspired me to spend my life working with plants and landscapes."

Others have been galvanized by Krishen's opposition to reckless development; for ecologists, preservation is as important as restoration. In "Trees of Delhi," he wrote about a rare, almost intact wilderness called Mangar Bani: a dry forest outside Delhi, in a valley where the village of Mangar sits. Krishen wrote that the *bani* ("little forest") was sacred among local residents, "protected by the superstition that anyone who breaks a branch or grazes his goats here will suffer grievous harm." But, in recent decades, villagers had joined mining companies and real-estate developers in illegally logging and selling parts of the forest. The *bani* is a "little green gem," Krishen told me. "If you can't preserve this, you can't preserve anything."

After "Trees of Delhi" brought Mangar Bani to public attention, a young man from the village named Sunil Harsana devoted himself to preserving the sacred grove and the thousands of acres of surrounding forest. He quit his job as a graphic designer at a newspaper, and scraped together funding for research. He told me, "When I got into this work, I asked the elders what they thought about the *bani*. They'd say, 'You can't do anything about it.' I decided, I'll do what I can, so I don't have that look on my face when I get old." Harsana, who is now thirty-six, said that he couldn't have done it without Krishen's advocacy, and the help of other outsiders: Chetan Agarwal, a fellow at an ecological nonprofit who had learned about Mangar Bani from Krishen; a retired Army officer; two environmental lawyers; a biologist. Together, they began to take real-estate companies to court, and Harsana contacted the press when trees were illicitly cut. He called himself the watchdog of Mangar, a role that aggravated many of his neighbors.

“People would cut whatever,” he said. “Now they know there will be a case. They don’t like me, but we’ve achieved an equilibrium.”

In places like Mangar Bani, environmentalists are trying to accommodate the principles of ecological restoration to political realities. One E.R.A. member told me, “The work Krishen is doing is certainly the way forward, but he is a prototype, and working with budgets that are not replicable on larger scales yet.” The areas that Krishen restores are, in a sense, laboratories for testing techniques. In places where human claims compete with restoration efforts, ecologists must focus as much on the behavior of people as on that of the wildlife.

During the conference at Mehrangarh, I met two founders of E.R.A., Divya Mudappa and T. R. Shankar Raman, who are tropical-forest ecologists. Personal and professional partners, they run a program for India’s Nature Conservation Foundation in the rain forests of the Western Ghats, a mountain range sixteen hundred miles south of the Thar Desert. They invited me to see their work on the Valparai Plateau, an area dominated by agricultural interests, which have both built the economy and harmed the environment.

The damage began in the nineteenth century, when the British started to cut down the jungle, replacing it with vast monoculture plantations of cardamom, coffee, and tea. Today, some seventy thousand people live there, and many of them work on the tea plantations—sprawling fields sometimes called “green deserts.” Mudappa said that she, too, used to think that tea was a terrible crop: “It is, in a way. But now we know that deserts aren’t dead.”

The final, hour-long climb through the Anaimalai Hills—named for the Asian elephant—consists of forty hairpin turns through dense forest and sheer drop-offs. Motorcyclists and bus drivers passed my cab with brio, ignoring signs that warned, “Elephants Have Right of Way.” As we approached the Valparai Plateau, the tea fields emerged. Bright green and cropped as neatly as an English croquet lawn, they lined the hills for miles. Rail-thin silver oaks, imported from Australia, were planted at regular intervals in the fields, for shade. Standing incongruously in narrow pathways among tea bushes were three gigantic gaur: Indian bison, six feet at the

shoulder and weighing more than a ton. A sign nailed to an oak advised, “Save Nature for Future.”

Raman and Mudappa follow the pragmatic principles of “community-based conservation,” performing a kind of ecological shuttle diplomacy from their N.C.F. jeep as they persuade plantations, residents, and donors to work with them. After twenty years on the job, they have reconciled themselves to partial success. Raman, soft-spoken and philosophical, talks about the need to address “ecological illiteracy.” Mudappa is more prone to expressions of delight (“Look, tree nymphs!”) and occasional admissions of frustration. She told me that “staving off pressures on the forest is an everyday battle and nightmare.”



“Try to ignore him. I’m here making sure you do your job, and he’s here making sure I do my job.”
Cartoon by Maddie Dai

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The Western Ghats, with at least three hundred and twenty-five endangered species, have been called one of the world's "hottest hotspots" of biodiversity. Roadkill is an obvious problem, and when Mudappa and Raman began working in the hills they considered creating wildlife corridors

to enable animals—particularly the endangered elephants—to travel between forested areas. But the plantations wouldn't agree, so they lowered their sights and focussed on conserving and restoring the forest that remains: fifty wooded patches of up to a few hundred acres apiece, separated by snaking roads, the town of Valparai, and the steeply tiered estates.

They showed me places where they have used "passive restoration" (preventing encroachment by road crews and people cutting firewood) and other stretches that have required "active restoration" (planting native species at the bedraggled edges). They measure success in incremental steps, not in the leaps attempted by billion-tree initiatives. Mudappa said, "If it doesn't become a rain forest, O.K. Elephants still use it." During the monsoon season, they go out with their staff—five field technicians, four conservationists, two Ph.D. students, and a few other seasonal employees—to plant three hundred and fifty to four hundred saplings a day. That sounded impressive, but Mudappa laughed and said, "The plantations go out in their trucks and plant silver oaks by the thousands—bang, bang, bang."

Seven Indian companies own the majority of the plantations. Mudappa and Raman have spent more than fifteen years securing alliances with three of the largest ones, the Tata Group, Parry Agro Industries, and the Woodbriar Group. N.C.F.'s nursery is on Tata's land. Mudappa and Raman showed me some of the roughly sixty thousand plants that the foundation grows there, mostly from seeds collected along the road and from the edges of plantations, and introduced me to some of their field technicians: two young women, who were repotting seedlings, and a middle-aged man, who was moving some saplings. They live in a nearby Kadar village. Part of Mudappa and Raman's mission is to demonstrate that forest dwellers know the land better than they do. Mudappa said that she relies on their "extremely good field craft," and considers them "the most natural allies for forest conservation and restoration."

The remaining rain forest is home to species that only an ecologist could love. Along with the charismatic megafauna—Bengal tigers, gaur, leopards, and elephants—there are small, outlandish creatures that include hump-nosed pit vipers, giant wood spiders, flying lizards, and the purple frog, a subterranean amphibian with a piglike snout which emerges from its burrow once a year to mate. (The frog was recently "discovered" by scientists, but

Mudappa emphasized that it has been “known to the local tribal people forever.”) As we walked in the woods, she bent down to remove a leech from her leg. A few moments later, I felt something crawl up my ankle—too quick to be a leech and too small, I hoped, to be a wood spider. I furtively slapped my calf until the sensation stopped.

For rain-forest conservationists, part of the job is to find ways to make it easier for humans and other animals to share territory. When monkeys began removing roof tiles from plantation workers’ houses and stealing food, Mudappa and Raman advised the families on better waste disposal, and provided new roofing, which the plantation installed. After a trip to Borneo, where they saw orangutans using cables to cross roads, they devised their own zip lines for macaques, made of recycled hoses from fire engines.

But these kinds of interventions do little to relieve the financial pressures faced by the plantations. The chairman of Parry Agro’s board, M. M. Venkatachalam, has spoken of trying to “make restoration an economic activity that can sustain itself.” He told me that balancing fiscal and ecological considerations is “a huge challenge—definitely in India, with its large population, where land is in short supply.” One of Parry Agro’s tea plantations is organic, but, he said, it yields less than half of what chemically treated plantations do. Parry Agro’s parent corporation also owns one of the country’s largest fertilizer companies: “India requires huge amounts of it to provide food for the population.” Yet chemical fertilizers can harm the fertility of soil and lead to pest infestations, and pollute the water and air. When I asked Venkatachalam about some of N.C.F.’s initiatives, he agreed that “greater diversity can improve the soil and control pests,” but said that now wasn’t the time to invest: “As prices fall and wages rise, the tea industry is going through financial difficulties.”

Mudappa and Raman, anticipating concerns about cost, have figured out how to practice a form of restoration virtually for free, with help from another endangered species: the great hornbill. In an essay, Raman describes it as “a giant among birds”—up to four feet long, sheathed in black and white feathers, with a “huge, grotesquely caparisoned beak” of bright yellow and a matching “horny protuberance,” called a casque. The female, after breeding and nest-building, lays her eggs and seals herself in with her droppings. She leaves a narrow opening, where her mate can leave food and

she can “forcibly eject” her further waste, “like a bazooka blast.” Late on our second afternoon, as we drove through a stretch of forest, Raman jammed on the brakes, crying, “Look!” We leaped out and saw twelve great hornbills, their distinctive beaks and plumage just visible as they soared above the canopy.

Mudappa was inspired to pursue ecological restoration after watching how hornbills and civets—voracious consumers of fruit and dispersers of seeds—practice it. Based on this knowledge, she and Raman are beginning a study for a new plan, in which some of the Australian silver oaks that dot the tea plantations would be replaced with native strangler figs. The seed of a strangler fig, they write in “Pillars of Life: Magnificent Trees of the Western Ghats,” is dropped by a hornbill, a bat, or a macaque into a “cozy nook on the high branches of the host tree,” where it can’t be eaten by deer or elephants. The sprout begins to send leaves above those of the host, and sinewy roots creep down the trunk and into the soil. Gradually, the roots form a thick, multipronged trunk, which smothers the host.

The strangler’s practice might seem like the basis for a horror movie, but, as Mudappa talked about their idea, it seemed like an act of poetic justice: replacing a pretty but ecologically negligible import with natives that produce tens of thousands of figs each—a perpetual feast for insects, birds, bats, and other pollinators. It would bring biodiversity to the tea fields, and potentially increase their yield. Mudappa said they have no intention of seeing all the oaks slowly consumed—“just ten to twenty per cent.” The only thing required of the plantations would be a “behavioral and attitudinal change”: stopping workers from lopping off fig sprouts when they trim the oaks each year.

Before I left, Mudappa and Raman invited me to their house in Valparai, for a cup of tea. Raman spoke hopefully about their work as a model of coöperative restoration between rewilders and planters. Mudappa countered that donors aren’t interested in models; they want projects that run like businesses, with quick, deliverable progress: “They say, ‘We want to scale up. What is your exit strategy?’ But restoration requires the long-term engagement of ecologists. I’m just happy that people want to restore parts of their land, and let us restore what’s left. Why shouldn’t this continue?”

Every day when Krishen is at home in Delhi, he walks in the Central Ridge—the forest that led to his discovery of the fortitude and bounty of trees. In September, 2020, he took some friends to marvel at a stand of seventy-foot kaim, the tree under which Krishna is said to have played as a boy. They took a wrong turn and came upon a vast open space, perhaps ten acres, that the Delhi Forest Department's earthmovers had scraped clear of ground cover. The workers had created "a military-style grid" for trees that would need far more water than the dry soil of the Ridge could provide. Krishen wrote a sharp letter to Delhi's lieutenant governor, and a scathing piece about how the Forest Department was proceeding "in dire ignorance of even the basic tenets of ecological restoration"—a process that would cause soil runoff and the sure death of ill-suited saplings. He called up several journalists, who returned with him and reported on the desecration.

Krishen has spent years campaigning for the restoration of the Ridge, which he believes could be "the most beautiful urban jungle in the world." In 2021, he was asked to serve on a six-member committee to advise the Delhi government on a plan for restoring biodiversity there. One major objective was to eradicate *Prosopis juliflora,* Krishen's old nemesis, which, he estimated, had overtaken ninety per cent of the forest. The plan's author—C. R. Babu, a professor emeritus at the University of Delhi's Centre for Environmental Management of Degraded Ecosystems—wanted to remake the Ridge along the lines of New York's Central Park, with tennis and handball courts. His proposal involved introducing at least half a dozen species that don't grow in Delhi. But, he explained, water tanks could be installed and contour trenches dug to keep the soil moist. The branches of *Prosopis* would be periodically lopped, and native plants installed beneath.

When Krishen objected that the plan wouldn't contain the *Prosopis* or restore the original flora, Babu retorted, "We do not need your half-baked theoretical knowledge." An exchange of haughty e-mails followed, and Babu soon resigned, saying that he couldn't work with the committee. Still, his plan remained. The minister in charge of forests persuaded the committee to agree to a pilot scheme of twenty-five acres, and Delhi's Forest Department began to put it into effect.

Krishen is accustomed to thwarted projects, which he calls "my little paper airplanes with bent noses." One restoration effort, in the northwest

Himalaya, was cut short when the nonprofit that he was working with ran out of money. But unreasonable resistance fires him up. He has several new books in mind, one of them a journal about the Central Ridge. It is sure to be part love letter to the native survivors, part screed against the British and Indian governments for despoiling the forest even as they aimed to prettify it, and part outline for a restoration project that would demonstrate how to invite the wilderness back into the city.

In the meantime, the ideas espoused by E.R.A. are spreading in India. Officials in the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu have been working with ecological restorationists for years. “Things are changing,” Ramesh Krishnamurthy, who leads courses for forest officers at the Wildlife Institute of India, told me. “A landscape-level approach for biodiversity management is functionally taking root.” Krishen and Raman are preparing their own training materials for forest departments.

One afternoon, Krishen took me through a section of the Central Ridge that he hopes will one day be rewilded. The Ridge is part of the Aravalli hills, which stretch northeast from Gujarat through Rajasthan and into Delhi. The range, Krishen wrote in “Trees of Delhi,” with a touch of competitive pride, is more than a billion years old, “compared to just fifty million for the Himalaya.” As I walked with him and his dogs, we turned onto a wide trail spread with hay. It followed colonial precedent: the British viceroy saw the Ridge as a pleasant place to ride horses—an “amenity forest.” Today, a cavalry regiment of the Indian Army leases a polo ground there. The hay prevents the horses from kicking up dust. Passing a pile of garbage, Krishen explained that the spot was a dumping ground for the polo clubhouse.

Krishen’s description of the forest was interrupted by a rude screech: a parakeet overhead. He sometimes finds crude wire traps for game animals—left, he speculated in one essay, by policemen “having their idea of manly fun.” Still, some wildlife remains: a subset of the original bird population, plentiful butterflies, and well-fed feral pigs, macaques, and cows, which congregate at the forest’s entrances. Krishen deplores its derelict state—“the Rutputty Ridge,” he calls it—but he is stubbornly hopeful: “Unlike everywhere else in Delhi, where we are very likely to have drenched the ground with chemicals and other toxic effluvia of human civilization, the Ridge’s soil is still alive.” ♦

An earlier version of this article imprecisely described the size of wooded patches in the Valparai plateau.

By Astha Rajvanshi

By Daniel A. Gross

By Kathryn Schulz

By Inkoo Kang

Annals of Technology

- **The World-Changing Race to Develop the Quantum Computer**

The World-Changing Race to Develop the Quantum Computer

Such a device could help address climate change and food scarcity, or break the Internet. Will the U.S. or China get there first?

By Stephen Witt



On the outskirts of Santa Barbara, California, between the orchards and the ocean, sits an inconspicuous warehouse, its windows tinted brown and its exterior painted a dull gray. The facility has almost no signage, and its name doesn't appear on Google Maps. A small label on the door reads "Google AI Quantum." Inside, the computer is being reinvented from scratch.

In September, Hartmut Neven, the founder of the lab, gave me a tour. Neven, originally from Germany, is a bald fifty-seven-year-old who belongs to the modern cast of hybridized executive-mystics. He talked of our quantum future with a blend of scientific precision and psychedelic glee. He wore a leather jacket, a loose-fitting linen shirt festooned with buttons, a pair of jeans with zippered pockets on the legs, and Velcro sneakers that looked like moon boots. "As my team knows, I never miss a single Burning Man," he told me.

In the middle of the warehouse floor, an apparatus the size and shape of a ballroom chandelier dangled from metal scaffolding. Bundles of cable snaked down from the top through a series of gold-plated disks to a processor below. The processor, named Sycamore, is a small, rectangular tile, studded with several dozen ports. Sycamore harnesses some of the weirdest properties of physics in order to perform mathematical operations that contravene all human intuition. Once it is connected, the entire unit is placed inside a cylindrical freezer and cooled for more than a day. The processor relies on superconductivity, meaning that, at ultracold temperatures, its resistance to electricity all but disappears. When the temperature surrounding the processor is colder than the deepest void of outer space, the computations can begin.

Classical computers speak in the language of bits, which take values of zero and one. Quantum computers, like the ones Google is building, use qubits, which can take a value of zero or one, and also a complex combination of zero *and* one at the same time. Qubits are thus exponentially more powerful than bits, able to perform calculations that normal bits can't. But, because of this elemental change, everything must be redeveloped: the hardware, the software, the programming languages, and even programmers' approach to problems.

On the day I visited, a technician—whom Google calls a "quantum mechanic"—was working on the computer with an array of small machine tools. Each qubit is controlled by a dedicated wire, which the technician, seated on a stool, attached by hand.

The quantum computer before us was the culmination of years of research and hundreds of millions of dollars in investment. It also barely functioned. Today's quantum computers are "noisy," meaning that they fail at almost everything they attempt. Nevertheless, the race to build them has attracted as dense a concentration of genius as any scientific problem on the planet. Intel, I.B.M., Microsoft, and Amazon are also building quantum computers. So is the Chinese government. The winner of the race will produce the successor to the silicon microchip, the device that enabled the information revolution.

A full-scale quantum computer could crack our current encryption protocols, essentially breaking the Internet. Most online communications, including financial transactions and popular text-messaging platforms, are protected by cryptographic keys that would take a conventional computer millions of years to decipher. A working quantum computer could presumably crack one in less than a day. That is only the beginning. A quantum computer could open new frontiers in mathematics, revolutionizing our idea of what it means to "compute." Its processing power could spur the development of new industrial chemicals, addressing the problems of climate change and food scarcity. And it could reconcile the elegant theories of Albert Einstein with the unruly microverse of particle physics, enabling discoveries about space and time. "The impact of quantum computing is going to be more profound than any technology to date," Jeremy O'Brien, the C.E.O. of the startup PsiQuantum, said recently. First, though, the engineers have to get it to work.

Imagine two pebbles thrown into a placid lake. As the stones hit the surface, they create concentric ripples, which collide to produce complicated patterns of interference. In the early twentieth century, physicists studying the behavior of electrons found similar patterns of wavelike interference in the subatomic world. This discovery led to a moment of crisis, since, under other conditions, those same electrons behaved more like individual points in space, called particles. Soon, in what many consider the most bizarre scientific result of all time, the physicists realized that whether an electron behaved more like a particle or more like a wave depended on whether or not someone was observing it. The field of quantum mechanics was born.

In the following decades, inventors used findings from quantum mechanics to build all sorts of technology, including lasers and transistors. In the early nineteen-eighties, the physicist Richard Feynman proposed building a "quantum computer" to obtain results that could not be calculated by conventional means. The reaction from the computer-science community was muted; early researchers had trouble getting slots at conferences. The practical utility of such a device was not demonstrated until 1994, when the mathematician Peter Shor, working at Bell Labs in New Jersey, showed that a quantum computer could help crack some of the most widely used encryption standards. Even before Shor published his results, he was approached by a concerned representative of the National Security Agency.

“Such a decryption ability could render the military capabilities of the loser almost irrelevant and its economy overturned,” one N.S.A. official later wrote.

Shor is now the chair of the applied-mathematics committee at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I visited him there in August. His narrow office was dominated by a large chalkboard spanning one wall, and his desk and his table were overflowing with scratch paper. Cardboard boxes sat in the corner, filled to capacity with Shor’s scribbled handiwork. One of the boxes was from the bookseller Borders, which went out of business eleven years ago.

Shor wears oval glasses, his belly is rotund, his hair is woolly and white, and his beard is unkempt. On the day I met him, he was drawing hexagons on the chalkboard, and one of his shoes was untied. “He looks exactly like the man who would invent algorithms,” a comment on a video of one of his lectures reads.

An algorithm is a set of instructions for calculation. A child doing long division is following an algorithm; so is a supercomputer simulating the evolution of the cosmos. The formal study of algorithms as mathematical objects only began in the twentieth century, and Shor’s research suggests that there is much we don’t understand. “We are probably, when it comes to algorithms, at the level the Romans were vis-à-vis numbers,” the experimental physicist Michel Devoret told me. He compared Shor’s work to the breakthroughs made with imaginary numbers in the eighteenth century.

Shor can be obsessive about algorithms. “I think about them late at night, in the shower, everywhere,” he said. “Interspersed with that, I scribble funny symbols on a piece of paper.” Sometimes, when a problem is especially engrossing, Shor will not notice that other people are talking to him. “It’s probably very annoying for them,” he said. “Except for my wife. She’s used to it.” Neven, of Google, recalled strolling with Shor through Cambridge as he expounded on his latest research. “He walked right through four lanes of traffic,” Neven said. (Shor told me that both of his daughters have been diagnosed with autism. “Of course, I have some of those traits myself,” he said.)

Shor’s most famous algorithm proposes using qubits to “factor” very large numbers into smaller components. I asked him to explain how it works, and he erased the hexagons from the chalkboard. The key to factoring, Shor said, is identifying prime numbers, which are whole numbers divisible only by one and by themselves. (Five is prime. Six, which is divisible by two and by three, is not.) There are twenty-five prime numbers between one and a hundred, but as you count higher they become increasingly rare. Shor, drawing a series of compact formulas on the chalkboard, explained that certain sequences of numbers repeat periodically along the number line. The distances between these repetitions grow exponentially, however, making them difficult to calculate with a conventional computer.

Shor then turned to me. “O.K., here is the heart of my discovery,” he said. “Do you know what a diffraction grating is?” I confessed that I did not, and Shor’s eyes grew wide with concern. He began drawing a simple sketch of a light beam hitting a filter and then diffracting into the colors of the rainbow, which he illustrated with colored chalk. “Each color of light has a wavelength,” Shor said. “We’re doing something similar. This thing is really a computational diffraction grating, so we’re sorting out the different periods.” Each color on the chalkboard represented a different grouping of numbers. A classical computer, looking at these groupings, would have to analyze them one at a time. A quantum computer could process the whole rainbow at once.

The challenge is to realize Shor’s theoretical work with physical hardware. In 2001, experimental physicists at I.B.M. tried to implement the algorithm by firing electromagnetic pulses at molecules suspended in liquid. “I think that machine cost about half a million dollars,” Shor said, “and it informed us that fifteen equals five times three.” Classical computing’s bits are relatively easy to build—think of a light switch, which can be turned either “on” or “off.” Quantum computing’s qubits require something like a dial, or, more accurately, several dials, each of which must be tuned to a specific amplitude. Implementing such precise controls at the subatomic scale remains a fiendish problem.

Still, in anticipation of the day that security experts call Y2Q , the protocols that safeguard text messaging, e-mail, medical records, and financial transactions must be torn out and replaced. Earlier this year, the Biden

Administration announced that it was moving toward new, quantum-proof encryption standards that offer protection from Shor's algorithm. Implementing them is expected to take more than a decade and cost tens of billions of dollars, creating a bonanza for cybersecurity experts. "The difference between this and Y2K is we knew the actual date when Y2K would occur," the cryptographer Bruce Schneier told me.

In anticipation of Y2Q , spy agencies are warehousing encrypted Internet traffic, hoping to read it in the near future. "We are seeing our adversaries do this—copying down our encrypted data and just holding on to it," Dustin Moody, the mathematician in charge of U.S. post-quantum encryption standards, said. "It's definitely a real threat." (When I asked him if the U.S. government was doing the same, Moody said that he didn't know.) Within a decade or two, most communications from this era will likely be exposed. The Biden Administration's deadline for the cryptography upgrade is 2035. A quantum computer capable of running a simple version of Shor's algorithm could appear as early as 2029.

At the root of quantum-computing research is a scientific concept known as "quantum entanglement." Entanglement is to computing what nuclear fission was to explosives: a strange property of the subatomic world that could be harnessed to create technology of unprecedented power. If entanglement could be enacted at the scale of everyday objects, it would seem like a magic trick. Imagine that you and a friend flip two entangled quarters, without looking at the results. The outcome of the coin flips will be determined only when you peek at the coins. If you inspect your quarter, and see that it came up heads, your friend's quarter will automatically come up tails. If your friend looks and sees that her quarter shows heads, your quarter will now show tails. This property holds true no matter how far you and your friend travel from each other. If you were to travel to Germany—or to Jupiter—and look at your quarter, your friend's quarter would instantaneously reveal the opposite result.

If you find entanglement confusing, you are not alone: it took the scientific community the better part of a century to begin to understand its effects. Like so many concepts in physics, entanglement was first described in one of Einstein's Gedankenexperiments. Quantum mechanics dictated that the properties of particles assumed fixed values only once they were measured.

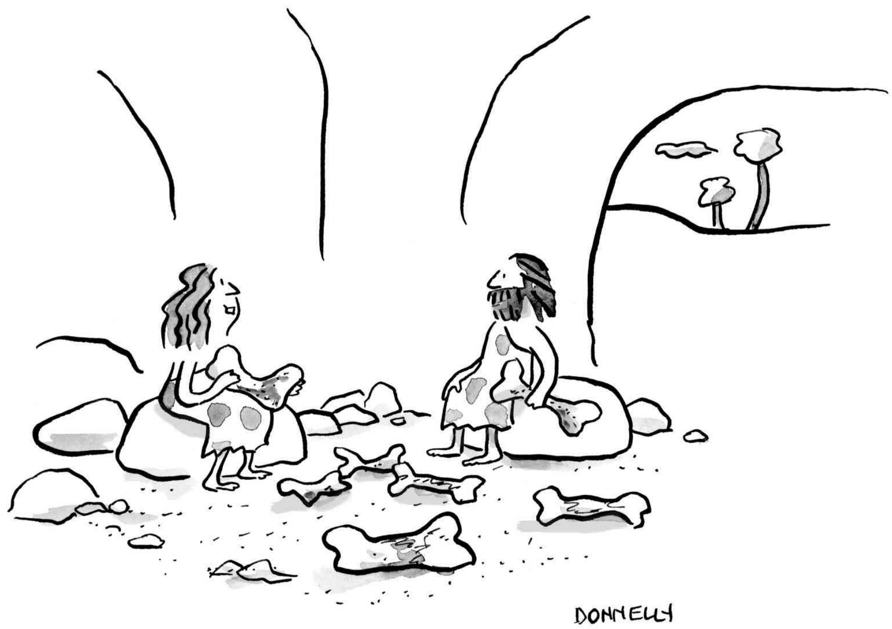
Before that, a particle existed in a "superposition" of many states at once, which were described using probabilities. (A famous thought experiment, proposed by the physicist Erwin Schrödinger, imagined a cat trapped in a box with a quantum-activated vial of poison, the cat superpositioned in a state between life and death.) This disturbed Einstein, who spent his later years formulating objections to the "new physics" of the generation that had succeeded him. In 1935, working with the physicists Boris Podolsky and Nathan Rosen, he revealed an apparent paradox in quantum mechanics: if one took the implications of the discipline seriously, it should be possible to create two entangled particles, separated by any distance, that could somehow interact faster than the speed of light. "No reasonable definition of reality could be expected to permit this," Einstein and his colleagues wrote. In subsequent decades, however, the other predictions of quantum mechanics were repeatedly verified in experiments, and Einstein's paradox was ignored. "Because his views went against the prevailing wisdom of his time, most physicists took Einstein's hostility to quantum mechanics to be a sign of senility," the historian of science Thomas Ryckman wrote.

Mid-century physicists focussed on particle accelerators and nuclear warheads; entanglement received little attention. In the early sixties, the Northern Irish physicist John Stewart Bell, working alone, reformulated Einstein's thought experiment into a five-page mathematical argument. He published his results in the obscure journal *Physics Physique Fizika* in 1964. During the next four years, his paper was not cited a single time.

In 1967, John Clauser, a graduate student at Columbia University, came across Bell's paper while paging through a bound volume of the journal at the library. Clauser had struggled with quantum mechanics, taking the course three times before receiving an acceptable grade. "I was convinced that quantum mechanics had to be wrong," he later said. Bell's paper provided Clauser with a way to put his objections to the test. Against the advice of his professors—including Richard Feynman—he decided to run an experiment that would vindicate Einstein, by proving that the theory of quantum mechanics was incomplete. In 1969, Clauser wrote a letter to Bell, informing him of his intentions. Bell responded with delight; no one had ever written to him about his theorem before.

Clauser moved to the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, in California, where, working with almost no budget, he created the world's first deliberately entangled pair of photons. When the photons were about ten feet apart, he measured them. Observing an attribute of one photon instantly produced opposite results in the other. Clauser and Stuart Freedman, his co-author, published their findings in 1972. From Clauser's perspective, the experiment was a disappointment: he had definitively proved Einstein wrong. Eventually, and with great reluctance, Clauser accepted that the baffling rules of quantum mechanics were, in fact, valid, and what Einstein considered a grotesque affront to human intuition was merely the way the universe works. "I confess even to this day that I still don't understand quantum mechanics," Clauser said, in 2002.

But Clauser had also demonstrated that entangled particles were more than just a thought experiment. They were real, and they were even stranger than Einstein had thought. Their weirdness attracted the attention of the physicist Nick Herbert, a Stanford Ph.D. and LSD enthusiast whose research interests included mental telepathy and communication with the afterlife. Clauser showed Herbert his experiment, and Herbert proposed a machine that would use entanglement to communicate faster than the speed of light, enabling the user to send messages backward through time. Herbert's blueprint for a time machine was ultimately deemed unfeasible, but it forced physicists to start taking entanglement seriously. "Herbert's erroneous paper was a spark that generated immense progress," the physicist Asher Peres recalled, in 2003.

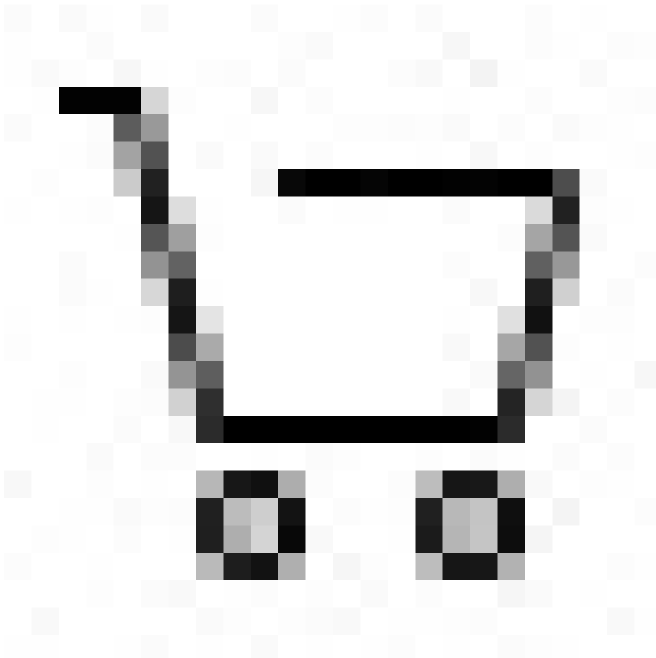


"I'm so glad you're a foodie."
Cartoon by Liza Donnelly

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Ultimately, the resolution to Einstein's paradox was not that the particles could signal faster than light; instead, once entangled, they ceased to be distinct objects, and functioned as one system that existed in two parts of the universe at the same time. (This phenomenon is called nonlocality.) Since the eighties, research into entanglement has led to continuing breakthroughs in both theoretical and experimental physics. In October, Clauser shared the Nobel Prize in Physics for his work. In a press release, the Nobel committee described entanglement as "the most powerful property of quantum mechanics." Bell did not live to see the revolution completed; he died in 1990. Today, his 1964 paper has been cited seventeen thousand times.

At Google's lab in Santa Barbara, the objective is to entangle many qubits at once. Imagine hundreds of coins, arranged into a network. Manipulating these coins in choreographed sequences can produce astonishing mathematical effects. One example is Grover's algorithm, developed by Lov Grover, Shor's colleague at Bell Labs in the nineties. "Grover's algorithm is about unstructured search, which is a nice example for Google," Neven, the founder of the lab, said. "I like to think about it as a huge closet with a million drawers." One of the drawers contains a tennis ball. A human rooting around in the closet will, on average, find the ball after opening half a million drawers. "As amazing as this may sound, Grover's algorithm could

do it in just one thousand steps," Neven said. "I think the whole magic of quantum mechanics can essentially be seen here."

Neven has had a peripatetic career. He originally majored in economics, but switched to physics after attending a lecture on string theory. He earned a Ph.D. focussing on computational neuroscience, and was hired as a professor at the University of Southern California. While he was at U.S.C., his research team won a facial-recognition competition sponsored by the U.S. Department of Defense. He started a company, Neven Vision, which developed the technology used in social-media face filters; in 2006, he sold the company to Google, for forty million dollars. At Google, he worked on image search and Google Glass, switching to quantum computing after hearing a story about it on public radio. His ultimate objective, he told me, is to explore the origins of consciousness by connecting a quantum computer to someone's brain.

Neven's contributions to facial-analysis technology are widely admired, and if you have ever pretended to be a dog on Snapchat you have him to thank. (You may thank him for the more dystopian applications of this technology as well.) But, in the past few years, in research papers published in the world's leading scientific journals, he and his team have also unveiled a series of small, peculiar wonders: photons that bunch together in clumps; identical particles whose properties change depending on the order in which they are arranged; an exotic state of perpetually mutating matter known as a "time crystal." "There's literally a list of a dozen things like this, and each one is about as science fictiony as the next," Neven said. He told me that a team led by the physicist Maria Spiropulu had used Google's quantum computer to simulate a "holographic wormhole," a conceptual shortcut through space-time—an achievement that recently made the cover of *Nature*.

Google's published scientific results in quantum computing have at times drawn scrutiny from other researchers. (One of the *Nature* paper's authors called their wormhole the "smallest, crummiest wormhole you can imagine." Spiropulu, who owns a dog named Qubit, concurred. "It's really very crummy, for real," she told me.) "With all these experiments, there's still a huge debate as to what extent are we actually doing what we claim," Scott Aaronson, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin who specializes

in quantum computing, said. “You kind of have to squint.” Nor will quantum computing replace the classical approach anytime soon. “Quantum computers are terrible at counting,” Marissa Giustina, a research scientist at Google, said. “We got ours to count to four.”

Giustina is one of the world’s leading experts on entanglement. In 2015, while working in the laboratory of the Austrian professor Anton Zeilinger, she ran an updated version of Clauser’s 1972 experiment. In October, Zeilinger was named a Nobel laureate, too. “After that, I got a bunch of pings saying, ‘Congratulations on winning your boss the Nobel Prize,’ ” Giustina said. She talked with some frustration about a machine that may soon model complex molecules but for now can’t do basic arithmetic. “It’s antithetical to what we experience in our everyday lives,” she said. “That’s what’s so annoying about it, and so beautiful.”

The main problem with Google’s entangled qubits is that they are not “fault-tolerant.” The Sycamore processor will, on average, make an error every thousand steps. But a typical experiment requires far more than a thousand steps, so, to obtain meaningful results, researchers must run the same program tens of thousands of times, then use signal-processing techniques to refine a small amount of valuable information from a mountain of data. The situation might be improved if programmers could inspect the state of the qubits while the processor is running, but measuring a superpositioned qubit forces it to assume a specific value, causing the calculation to deteriorate. Such “measurements” need not be made by a conscious observer; any number of interactions with the environment will result in the same collapse. “Getting quiet, cold, dark places for qubits to live is a fundamental part of getting quantum computing to scale,” Giustina said. Google’s processors sometimes fail when they encounter radiation from outside our solar system.

In the early days of quantum computing, researchers worried that the measurement problem was intractable, but in 1995 Peter Shor showed that entanglement could be used to correct errors, too, ameliorating the high fault rate of the hardware. Shor’s research attracted the attention of Alexei Kitaev, a theoretical physicist then working in Moscow. In 1997, Kitaev improved on Shor’s codes with a “topological” quantum-error-correction scheme. John Preskill, a theoretical physicist at Caltech, spoke of Kitaev, who is now a professor at the school, with something approaching awe. “He’s very

creative, and he's technically very deep," Preskill said. "He's one of the few people I know that I can call, without any hesitation, a genius."

I met Kitaev in his spacious office at Caltech, which was almost completely empty. He was wearing running shoes. After spending the day thinking about particles, Kitaev told me, he walks for about an hour to clear his mind. On hard days, he might walk for longer. A few miles north of Caltech sits Mt. Wilson, where, in the nineteen-twenties, Edwin Hubble used what was then the world's largest telescope to deduce that the universe was expanding. "I've been on Mt. Wilson maybe a hundred times," Kitaev said. When a problem is really tough, Kitaev skips Mt. Wilson, and instead hikes nearby Mt. Baldy, a ten-thousand-foot peak that is often covered in snow.

Quantum computing is a Mt. Baldy problem. "I made a prediction, in 1998, that the computers would be realized in thirty years," Kitaev said. "I'm not sure we'll make it." Kitaev's error-correction scheme is one of the most promising approaches to building a functional quantum computer, and, in 2012, he was awarded the Breakthrough Prize, the world's most lucrative science award, for his work. Later, Google hired him as a consultant. So far, no one has managed to implement his idea.

Preskill and Kitaev teach Caltech's introductory quantum-computing course together, and their classroom is overflowing with students. But, in 2021, Amazon announced that it was opening a large quantum-computing laboratory on Caltech's campus. Preskill is now an Amazon Scholar; Kitaev remained with Google. The two physicists, who used to have adjacent offices, today work in separate buildings. They remain collegial, but I sensed that there were certain research topics on which they could no longer confer.

In early 2020, scientists at Pfizer began producing hundreds of experimental pharmaceuticals intended to treat *Covid*-19. That July, they synthesized seven milligrams of a research chemical labelled PF-07321332, one of twenty formulations the company produced that week. PF-07321332 remained an anonymous vial in a laboratory refrigerator until September, when experiments showed that it was effective at suppressing *Covid*-19 in rats. The chemical was subsequently combined with another substance and rebranded as Paxlovid, a drug cocktail that reduces *Covid*-19-related hospitalizations by some ninety per cent. Paxlovid is a lifesaver, but, with

the assistance of a quantum computer, the laborious process of trial and error that led to its development might have been shortened. “We are just guessing at things that can be directly designed,” the venture capitalist Peter Barrett, who is on the board of the startup PsiQuantum, told me. “We’re guessing at things which our civilization entirely depends on—but that is by no means optimal.”

Fault-tolerant quantum computers should be able to simulate the molecular behavior of industrial chemicals with unprecedented precision, guiding scientists to faster results. In 2019, researchers predicted that, with just a thousand fault-tolerant qubits, a method for producing ammonia for agricultural use, called the Haber-Bosch process, could be accurately modelled for the first time. An improvement to this process would lead to a substantial decrease in carbon-dioxide emissions. Lithium, the primary component of batteries for electric cars, is a simple element with an atomic number of three. A fault-tolerant quantum computer, even a primitive one, might show how to expand its capacity to store energy, increasing vehicle range. Quantum computers could be used to develop biodegradable plastics, or carbon-free aviation fuel. Another use, suggested by the consulting company McKinsey, was “simulating surfactants to develop a better carpet cleaner.” “We have good reason to believe that a quantum computer would be able to efficiently simulate any process that occurs in nature,” Preskill wrote, a few years ago.

The world we live in is the macroscopic scale. It is the world of ordinary kinetics: billiard balls and rocket ships. The world of subatomic particles is the quantum scale. It is the world of strange effects: interference and uncertainty and entanglement. At the boundary of these two worlds is what scientists call the “nanoscopic” scale, the world of molecules. For the most part, molecules behave like billiard balls, but if you zoom in close enough you begin to notice quantum effects. It is at the nanoscopic scale that researchers expect quantum computing to solve its first meaningful problems, in pharmaceuticals and materials design, perhaps with just a few hundred fault-tolerant qubits. And it is in this discipline—quantum molecular chemistry—that analysts expect the first real money in quantum computing to be made. Quantum physics wins the Nobel. Quantum chemistry will write the checks.

The potential windfall from licensing royalties has excited investors. In addition to the tech giants, a raft of startups are trying to build quantum computers. The Quantum Insider, an industry trade publication, has tallied more than six hundred companies in the sector, and another estimate suggests that thirty billion dollars has been invested in developing quantum technology worldwide. Many of these businesses are speculative. IonQ , based in College Park, Maryland, went public last year, despite having almost no sales. Researchers there compute with qubits obtained using the “trapped ion” approach, arranging atoms of the rare-earth element ytterbium into a tidy row, then manipulating them with a laser. Jungsang Kim, IonQ’s C.T.O., told me that his ion traps maintain entanglement better than Google’s processors, but he admitted that, as more qubits are added, the laser system gets more complicated. “Improving the controller, that’s kind of our sticking point,” he said.

At PsiQuantum, in Palo Alto, engineers are making qubits from photons, the weightless particles of light. “The advantage of this approach is that we use preëxisting silicon-fabrication technology,” Pete Shadbolt, the company’s chief scientific officer, said. “Also, we can operate at somewhat higher temperatures.” PsiQuantum has raised half a billion dollars. There are other, weirder approaches. Microsoft, building on Kitaev’s work, is attempting to construct a “topological” qubit, which requires synthesizing an elusive particle in order to work. Intel is trying the “silicon spin” approach, which embeds qubits in semiconductors. The competition has led to bidding wars for talent. “If you have an advanced degree in quantum physics, you can go out into the job market and get five offers in three weeks,” Kim said.

Even the most optimistic analysts believe that quantum computing will not earn meaningful profits in the next five years, and pessimists caution that it could take more than a decade. It seems likely that a lot of expensive equipment will be developed with little durable purpose. “You walk down the hall at the Computer History Museum, in Mountain View, and you see a mercury delay line,” Shadbolt said, referring to an obsolete contraption from the nineteen-forties that stored information using sound waves. “I love thinking about the guys who built that.”

It is difficult, even for insiders, to determine which approach is currently in the lead. “ ‘Pivot’ is the Silicon Valley word for a near-death experience,”

Neven said. “But if one day we see that superconducting qubits are outcompeted by some other technology, like photonics, I would pivot in a heartbeat.” Neven actually seemed relieved by the competition. His laboratory is expensive, and quantum computing is the kind of moon-shot project that thrived during the era of low interest rates. “Because of the present financial situation, startups in our field have more difficulties finding investors,” Devoret, the experimental physicist, told me. But, as long as Amazon is investing in quantum computing, it’s a good bet that Google will keep funding it, too. There is also the tacit support of the state—the U.S. intelligence apparatus has made quantum decryption a priority, regardless of market fluctuations. In fact, Neven’s stiffest competition comes not from the private sector but from the Chinese Communist Party. John Martinis, a former head of quantum computing at Google, said, “In terms of making high-quality qubits, one could say the Chinese are in the lead.”

At the campuses of the University of Science and Technology of China, four competing quantum-computing technologies are being developed in parallel. In a paper published in *Science*, in 2020, a team led by the scientists Lu Chao-Yang and Pan Jian-Wei announced that their processor had solved a computational task millions of times faster than the best supercomputer. Pan is one of the most daring researchers in quantum entanglement. In 2017, his team ran an experiment that entangled two photons at an observatory in Tibet, and transmitted one of them to an orbiting satellite. The scientists then transferred attributes from a third photon on Earth to the one in space, using the technique of “quantum teleportation.”

Lu and I spoke by video earlier this year. He joined the call late and was covered in sweat, having sprinted home from a mandatory *Covid* test. Lu immediately began debunking claims made by his competitors, and even claims made about his own effort. One widely reported figure stated that China has invested fifteen billion dollars in developing a quantum computer. “I have no idea how that was started,” Lu said. “The actual money is maybe twenty-five per cent of that.”

Jiuzhang, Lu’s photonic quantum computer, is undoubtedly one of the world’s fastest, but Lu has repeatedly chided his colleagues for overhyping the technology. On our call, he pulled up a video clip of a woman attempting to arrange ten kittens in a line. “Here is the problem we face,” he said. A

kitten scurried to the back and the woman raced to grab it. “You want to control multiple qubits with high precision,” Lu said, “but they should be very well isolated from the environment.” As the woman replaced the first kitten, several others fled.

Lu cautioned that quantum computers faced stiff competition from ordinary silicon chips. The earliest electronic computers, from the forties, had to beat only humans. Quantum computers must prove their superiority to supercomputers that can run a quintillion calculations per second. “We see fairly few quantum algorithms where there is proof of exponential speedup,” he said. “In many cases, it’s not clear that it wouldn’t be better to use a regular computer.” Lu also disputed Martinis’s contention that China was making the best qubits. “Actually, I think Google’s in the lead,” he said.

Neven agreed. “Sometime in the next year, I think we will make the first fully fault-tolerant qubit,” he said. From there, Google plans to scale up its computing effort by chaining processors together. Adjacent to the warehouse I visited was a second, bigger space, where sunshine streamed into a dusty construction site. There, Google plans to build a computer that will require a freezer as large as a one-car garage. A thousand fault-tolerant qubits should be enough to run accurate simulations of molecular chemistry. Ten thousand fault-tolerant qubits could begin to unlock new findings in particle physics. From there, researchers could start to run Shor’s algorithm at full power, exposing the secrets of our era. “It’s quite possible that I will die before it happens,” Shor, who is sixty-three, told me. “But I would really like to see it happen, and I think it’s also quite possible that I will live long enough to see it.” ♦

By Jay Caspian Kang

By Bill McKibben

By Elizabeth Kolbert

By James Wood

Best Medicine

- Amber Ruffin Doesn’t Have Time to Go Insane

Amber Ruffin Doesn’t Have Time to Go Insane

The comedian and host of “The Amber Ruffin Show” (and author, writer for “Late Night with Seth Meyers,” “Drunk History” guest, and book writer for three musicals) discusses mining laughs from racism.

By Henry Alford



When Amber Ruffin and her sister Lacey were growing up, in Omaha, Nebraska, in the nineties, one of them would sometimes look at their mother—who, like the Ruffin sisters, is Black—and joke, “Eww. Your help is making eye contact with me.”

Asked, in her office at 30 Rockefeller Plaza not long ago, what age she had been, Ruffin hazarded, “It probably started when we were teen-agers? We were definitely old enough to get away if she decided to run after us.”

Finding the humor in bigotry has become something of a specialty for Ruffin. In 2014, she joined “Late Night with Seth Meyers,” becoming the first Black woman to write for a late-night TV show. In 2020, right after George Floyd’s killing, Meyers told his viewers, “As a white man, I can’t

speak of the deep-rooted and justified fear that African Americans have when encountered by the police, so here is 'Late Night' writer Amber Ruffin." Thus began a week's worth of on-camera testimony from Ruffin about her run-ins with the police over the years—one cop, who found Ruffin sitting in a car with a white friend, tried to bust her for soliciting; another screamed at her for driving five miles over the speed limit until Ruffin sobbed. This testimony, along with other recurring bits—"Amber's Minute of Fury," "Amber Says What," and, with Ruffin's gay colleague Jenny Hagel, "Jokes Seth Can't Tell"—gave way to Ruffin's own news-based variety show on Peacock, "The Amber Ruffin Show." Now Ruffin has co-written the book of the new musical adaptation of Broadway's "Some Like It Hot," which features Black actors in the roles originally played by Marilyn Monroe and Jack Lemmon, and she and her sister have just published "The World Record Book of Racist Stories," a second collection of anecdotes of everyday discrimination.

"If Black people didn't find the comedy in racism—which we always do—you'd have a bunch of fuckin' *dead* Black people. We'd go insane," Ruffin said, seated behind her desk, where she had just painted her nails a color she referred to as "minty." People who know Ruffin only from her appearances on "Drunk History," in which comedians are pitilessly overserved prior to reciting historical narratives from memory, might be delighted to learn that Ruffin's drunk and sober personalities are virtually identical. She has a laugh that recalls the snicker of her childhood lodestar, Whoopi Goldberg; when she is especially amused, she clutches her stomach.

Ruffin's "Late Night" segment about the police had been her own idea. "It felt like an emergency," she said. An armchair psychologist might trace Ruffin's ability to rise to an occasion back to her childhood, in Omaha—once, the director of her church's choir was unable to continue directing, and twelve-year-old Amber sallied forth and took charge of her fellow-singers—but Ruffin herself pointed to her time in the comedy trenches, at Boom Chicago and Second City. "With improv, you *have* to do something, and you have to do it now. It's just a measure of your willingness. Are you willing to potentially look like an idiot? *I* am! It's easy, and no one cares." Ruffin's favorite part of her two TV gigs is responding quickly to breaking news, which was sometimes required in improv. "To have more than four seconds is a luxury," she said. "It's a thrill."

When Trevor Noah announced, in September, that he was leaving his hosting gig on "The Daily Show," rumors abounded that Ruffin would be his replacement. "Contractually, I don't see how it would happen," she said. "But I've never been part of a rumor before, and this one is the fuckin' funnest!" Ruffin thought that the next "Daily Show" host was more likely to come from the show's roster of correspondents and alumni, which includes Roy Wood, Jr., Jessica Williams, and Ronny Chieng.

In the meantime, Ruffin is working on the books of two new musicals, including a revival of "The Wiz," from 1975—which, when added to her writing gigs for Meyers, "The Amber Ruffin Show," and "Some Like It Hot," totals five jobs. This amount of activity and stress has reduced the number of possible hours for cuddling with her Dutch husband ("I don't know him"), but it has not otherwise threatened her equanimity; she says she experiences a jolt of excitement every time she wakes up and realizes that she is not a science teacher in Omaha.

"I'll sleep when I'm dead," she said, eying a computer screen with a profusion of open tabs. "And, if there's something to do even then, I will do that." ♦

By Ian Crouch

By Rachel Aviv

By Amanda Petrusich

By Ted Geltner

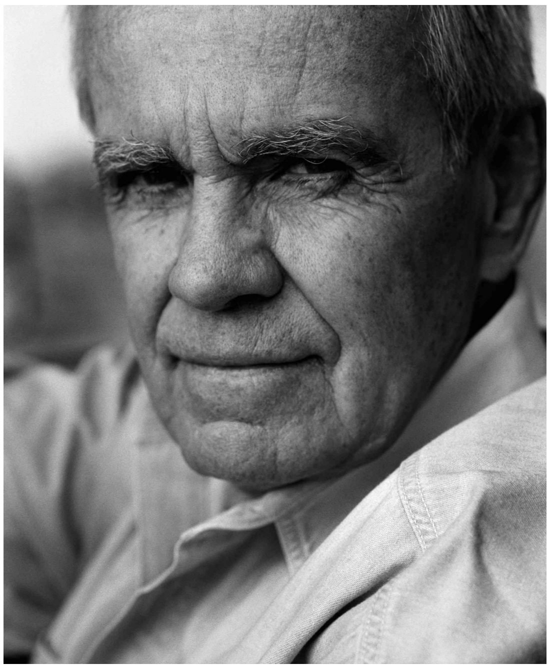
Books

- Cormac McCarthy Peers Into the Abyss
- Briefly Noted

Cormac McCarthy Peers Into the Abyss

The eighty-nine-year-old novelist has long dealt with apocalyptic themes. But a pair of novels about ill-starred mathematicians takes him down a different road.

By [James Wood]



There have always been two dominant styles in Cormac McCarthy's prose—roughly, afflatus and deflatus, with not enough breathable oxygen between them. McCarthy in afflatus mode is magnificent, vatic, wasteful, hammy. The words stagger around their meanings, intoxicated by the grandiloquence of their gesturing: "God's own mudlark trudging cloaked and muttering the barren selvage of some nameless desolation where the cold sidereal sea breaks and seethes and the storms howl in from out of that black and heaving alcahest." McCarthy's deflatus mode is a rival rhetoric of mute exhaustion, as if all words, hungover from the intoxication, can hold on only to habit and familiar things: "He made himself a sandwich and spread some mustard over it and he poured a glass of milk." "He put his toothbrush back in his shavingkit and got a towel out of his bag and went down to the

bathroom and showered in one of the steel stalls and shaved and brushed his teeth and came back and put on a fresh shirt."

McCarthy's novel "The Road" (2006) can be seen as both the fulfillment and the transformation of this profligately gifted stylist, because in it the two styles justified themselves and came together to make a third style, of punishing and limpid beauty. The afflatus mode was vindicated by the post-apocalyptic horrors of the material. It might have been hard to credit, say, contemporary Knoxville as the ruined city that McCarthy describes in his earlier novel "Suttree" (1979), a giant carcass that "lay smoking, the sad purlieus of the dead immured with the bones of friends and forebears . . . vectors of nowhere," and all the rest. But the imagination had much less difficulty in "The Road," where a similar rhetoric floats over the ashen landscape of an annihilating catastrophe. Meanwhile, the deflatus mode suddenly made both literary and ethical sense, since a world nearly stripped of people and objects would necessitate a language of primal simplicity, as if words had to learn all over again how to find their referents. One of the most moving scenes in "The Road" involves a father and son discovering an unopened can of Coke, as if in some parody of Hemingway's Nick Adams stories, with the father having to explain to the son just what this fabled object once was.

The third style holds in beautiful balance the oracular and the ordinary. In "The Road," a lean poetry captures many ruinous beauties—for instance, the way that ash, a "soft black talc," blows through the abandoned streets "like squid ink uncoiling along a sea floor." This third style has, in truth, always existed in McCarthy's novels, though sometimes it appeared to lead a slightly fugitive life. Amid all the gory sublimities of "Blood Meridian" (1985), one could still find something as lovely and precise as "the dry white rocks of the dead river floor round and smooth as arcane eggs," or a description of yellow-eyed wolves "that trotted neat of foot." In "Suttree," published six years before the overheated "Blood Meridian," this third style was easier to find, the writer frequently abjuring the large, imprecise adverb for the smaller, exact one—"When he put his hand up her dress her legs fell open bonelessly"—or the perfect little final noun: "while honeysuckle bloomed in the creek gut."

The Best Books of 2022

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There may be several reasons that McCarthy's simpler third style is so often the dominant rhetoric in his two new novels, "The Passenger" and "Stella Maris" (both Knopf). Their author is nearing ninety, and perhaps a relatively unburdened late style tempts the loaded rhetorician who has become "weary of congestion" (as Henry James assessed late Shakespeare). A character in "The Passenger" describes this condition with appropriate plainness: "To prepare for any struggle is largely a work of unburdening yourself. . . . Austerity lifts the heart and focuses the vision." A likelier reason is that, for the first time in his career, McCarthy is aiming to write fiction about "ideas": these two novels contain extended conversations about physics, language, and the symbolic languages of music and mathematics.

Of course, his earlier novels explored "themes" and, in their way, ideas; an academic industry loyally decodes McCarthy's every blood-steeped move around evil, suffering, God or no-God, the Bible, genocidal American expansion, the Western, environmental catastrophe, and so on. But those novels did not purvey, and in some sense could have no space for, intellectual discourse. These books were inhospitable to intellectuals, with their characteristic chatter. McCarthy's two dominant styles conspired to void his fiction of such discourse. The afflatus mode gestured toward its

themes so stormily that ideas were deprived of the thing that gives them power, their ability to refer. There is mathematics and theology in the following sentence from "Suttree," but of the most opaque kind: "These simmering sinners with their cloaks smoking carry the Logos itself from the tabernacle and bear it through the streets while the absolute prebarbaric mathematick of the western world howls them down and shrouds their ragged biblical forms in oblivion." At the same time, the deflatus style wicks away all thought—William Carlos Williams's motto, "No ideas but in things," has always come to mind when McCarthy is trudging along in this minimalist mode.

In the new pair of novels, which separately tell the life stories of two brilliant and frustrated physicists, Bobby Western and his younger sister, Alicia, a fresh space is made to enable the exchange of ideas, and the rhetorical consequences are felt in the very textures of the fiction. The old, bifurcated McCarthy is still evident in every sentence—my earlier unsourced examples of afflatus and deflatus were all from "The Passenger"—but the new hospitality to physics entails a hospitality to the rational that hasn't exactly bulked large in McCarthy's most celebrated work. His ear for dialogue has always been impeccable; in these novels, in place of the portentous reticence of McCarthy's earlier conversations, whole sections are given over to long scenes of lucidly urbane dialogue. People think and speak rationally, mundanely, intelligently, crazily, as they do in real life; only for a writer as strange as McCarthy would this innovation deserve attention. And along with the excellent dialogue there are scores of lovely noticings, often of the natural world. In Montana, pheasants are seen crossing the road "with their heads bowed like wrongdoers." A fire on a Mediterranean beach: "The flames sawed in the wind." Taking off over Mexico City, "the plane lifted up through the blue dusk into sunlight again and banked over the city and the moon dropped down the glass of the cabin like a coin falling through the sea. . . . Far below the shape of the city in its deep mauve grids like a vast motherboard."

"The Passenger" and "Stella Maris" function together and apart, a bit like those early stereo recordings where, as it were, you can hear Ringo and Paul on the left speaker and George and John on the right. "The Passenger" tells the story of Bobby; "Stella Maris" tells the story of Alicia. The two are the children of a Jewish physicist who worked with J. Robert Oppenheimer on

the Manhattan Project. They grew up in Los Alamos, and both showed a remarkable aptitude for mathematics. Bobby got a scholarship to Caltech, but instead of earning a doctorate he dropped out, because he wasn't a good enough mathematician. As he explains, the history of physics is full of people who gave up in this way, because they couldn't add anything to "the rare pantheon of world-shaping theories." Buoyed by a family legacy, Bobby went to Europe and raced cars (Formula 2), until a crash in 1972 landed him in a coma. It's 1980 when we join Bobby's adventuring in "The Passenger"; he is thirty-seven and is working out of New Orleans as a deep-sea salvage diver.

Bobby wishes he'd remained in his coma, because he wakened to a world of grief. Alicia, far more brilliant than her brother but plagued by schizophrenia and depression, committed suicide not long after his accident. Alicia is thus only a memory in "The Passenger," though the book is punctuated by scenes that depict her hallucinations—she holds extended, antic conversations with a bullying bald dwarf known as the Kid (a nod, perhaps, to a character of the same name in "Blood Meridian"). Later in the novel, this same hallucinatory figure visits an ailing Bobby, and converses with him, too.

"Stella Maris," named for a psychiatric institution in Wisconsin that the twenty-year-old Alicia has checked herself into, is about half the length of "The Passenger," and consists of transcribed therapeutic conversations between Alicia and her psychiatrist, Dr. Cohen. This novel is set in 1972, with Bobby still unconscious in Italy, and Alicia contemplating her eventual suicide. Like Bobby, Alicia has abandoned mathematics—not because she isn't good enough but because she's too good. She belongs to that tradition of Wittgensteinian geniuses who find regular ratiocination far too easy, quickly exhaust all available formulas, and spend the rest of their troubled lives brilliantly picketing the gates of their official disciplines. She graduated from the University of Chicago at the age of sixteen, was offered a fellowship at the Institut des Hautes Études Scientifiques, near Paris, and began corresponding with the great French-based mathematician Alexander Grothendieck (1928-2014), himself a rebel genius who at a young age somehow exhausted mathematics, or was exhausted by it, or both.

These two doomed Mensa mates, Alicia and Bobby, are full of surprises. Alicia is not only a mathematical genius but a gifted violinist. She spent her

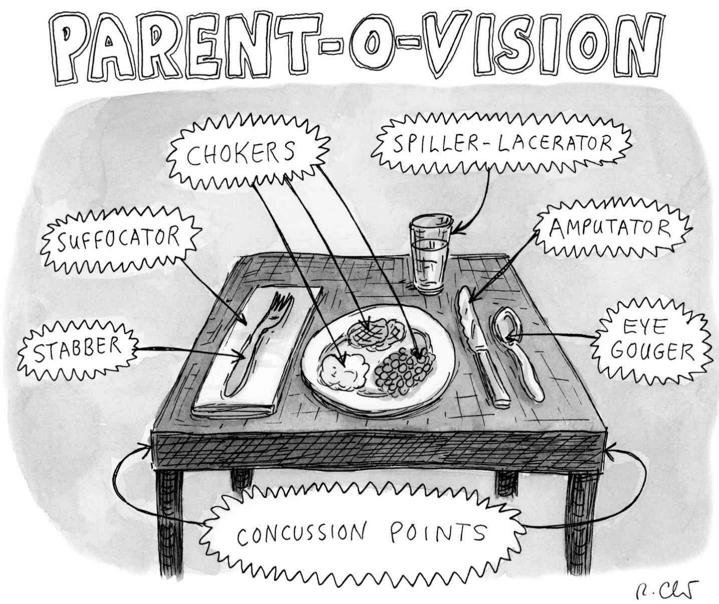
portion of the family legacy on a rare Amati violin, for which she paid two hundred and thirty thousand dollars, sight unseen. Naturally, she abandoned serious playing as soon as she realized that she wouldn't be among "the top ten" in the world. Alicia is also very beautiful—what another character, male, of course, calls "drop dead gorgeous." Bobby may not have been at her intellectual level, but he's a walking Renaissance of his own. When someone quotes Cioran to him in a bar, he replies with the appropriate retort from Plato. He has played mandolin in a professional bluegrass band, can recognize at a glance a Patek Philippe Calatrava as a "pre-war" watch, and drives a 1973 Maserati Bora (which I half expected to come kitted out with special weapons and an ejector seat). He's enigmatically solitary. With certain friends, he'll occasionally expatiate on matters mathematical, but more often he expresses himself in tough-guy word bullets, like Steve McQueen playing a physicist. When he collects his Maserati from a storage facility, and is asked by the man who works in the office how long the drive to Tennessee will be (Bobby is visiting his grandmother), the exchange is pelleted out thus:

> That's a pretty good drive, aint it? What, is she fixin to kick off and leave you some scratch?
> Not that I know of.
> How long a drive is it?
> I dont know. Six hundred and some odd miles.
> How long will that take you?
> Maybe six hours.
> Bullshit.
> Five and a half?
> Get your ass out of here.

"To see her in sunlight was to see Marxism die," Harold Brodkey wrote of a fictional heroine. And credulity, too. Alicia is the womanly total package who slays all men, and Bobby is the manly total package all women would surely die for. In an early scene, a woman in a bar admires his ass.

So at the human level, at the level of verisimilitude, these two companion novels are hardly serious. Perhaps McCarthy seeks to indemnify himself against the charge of authorial wish fulfillment by dooming his fantastical characters to early demises. We learn that the great, almost unspeakable

tragedy of their lives is that the siblings loved each other too intensely for comfort. As a young teen-ager, Alicia wanted to become her brother's lover; Bobby balked. Madness and lament followed; neither can exist for very long without the other. Both characters are also haunted by the legacy of their father's work on the atomic bomb. To bulk out "The Passenger," McCarthy hangs a fairly gestural paranoid plot over Bobby's movements, and it's this plot that gives the novel its title. Inspecting a private jet that has sunk off the Gulf Coast, Bobby and his colleague notice that one of the passengers on the manifest—the rest of whom, watery corpses, are still strapped into their seats—seems to be missing. Soon enough, Bobby is being visited and surveilled by strange men who may or may not work for the F.B.I., and who are extremely interested in what he knows about this missing passenger. Eventually, the I.R.S. seizes Bobby's accounts, and he heads out West—to Texas, Montana, Wyoming—where he lives for a while as a dilapidated outcast.



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But the paranoid plotline is just a pretext for getting Bobby on that tattered and eternal pilgrimage of McCarthy's male heroes, each of whom might be named "the passenger," and who journey along a path elemental and mythical enough to be called, from the start, and recurringly, "the road."

Officially, Bobby is pursued by the government, but really he's pursued by the grief he feels at the loss of his sister, by the dubious legacy of his father's work, and by that theological woundedness shared by so many McCarthy heroes. Such men are invariably figured as some variation on the theme of "the first person on earth or the last," a version of which dutifully receives its annunciation in the course of this novel. By the end of "The Passenger," Bobby has fetched up in an old windmill near the Mediterranean Sea, somewhere off the coast of Spain. He is now the "last pagan on earth," "the last of all men who stands alone in the universe while it darkens around him." Familiar McCarthy territory, and easy enough to mock. But it would hardly be fair to these novels to neglect to add that, though the protagonists may be improbable, the writing, by and large, is not. The poignant scene, for instance, in which Bobby visits his grandmother in Tennessee is faultlessly written. Bobby's evocations of Los Alamos and the Trinity nuclear test have an appropriately haunted power. ("Two. One. Zero. Then the sudden whited meridian.") His solitary trek through the Western states yields sentence after sentence of delicate invention: "A squat ricepaper moon rode the lightwires."

Bobby's final pilgrimage can be seen as a tribute to the closing pages of "Suttree," in which the eponymous character suffers a kind of hallucinated breakdown, and then leaves Knoxville, lighting out for the Territory as he exits the novel. But the clarity of McCarthy's language in "The Passenger" contrasts sharply with the heady obscurantism of "Suttree." When Bobby and Alicia talk to other characters in these new novels about twentieth-century mathematics and physics, McCarthy is forced to use a shared language of respectable rationality. Here is Alicia, explaining her interest in game theory to Dr. Cohen, with insider references to John von Neumann and the English mathematician John Horton Conway:

> I spent a certain amount of time on game theory. There's something seductive about it. Von Neumann got caught up in it. Maybe that's not the right term. But I think I finally began to see that it promised explanations it wasnt capable of supplying. It really is game theory. It's not something else. Conway or no Conway. Everything you start out with is a tool, but your hope is that it actually comprises a theory.

And here is Bobby on Murray Gell-Mann and George Zweig, and the discovery of the quark:

> Still, it's a simple enough idea. That nucleons are composed—as it were—of a small companionship of lesser particles. Groups of three. For the hadrons. All but identical. [Zweig] called them aces. He told me he didnt think anyone else could figure this out and that he had all the time in the world to formalize it. He didnt know that Murray was on his trail and that he had less than a year. In the end Murray called the particles quarks—after a line in Joyce's Finnegans Wake, referring to cottage cheese. Three quarks for Muster Mark. And he swept the field and won the Nobel Prize and George went into therapy. . . . Murray originally presented the theory as speculative. As a mathematical model. He always denied this later but I've read the papers. George on the other hand knew that it was a hard physical theory. Which of course it was.

McCarthy has had a close connection with the interdisciplinary Santa Fe Institute since its founding, by Gell-Mann and others, in 1984, and maintained long-standing friendships with Gell-Mann and Zweig, whom he met through the MacArthur Foundation. The reader can be fairly sure he's had his physics and mathematics checked by those who know what they're talking about. But these cannot be novels "about" mathematics, since the novelist lacks the power to do any mathematics. They are novels about mathematicians, and they stand or fall on their ability to make Bobby and Alicia plausible as such. So how *do* brilliant mathematicians think and talk? Since presumably a great deal of their thought and talk is mathematical, we confront again the problem we began with.

There are shrewd novelistic reasons, then, that these two books concern intellectuals who have abandoned their discipline—their rebellious abstinence releases McCarthy from having to represent his subjects doing any ongoing scientific work. Instead, as is fictively appropriate, we're offered the drama of their disenchantment, along with their various emotional and metaphysical dilemmas: this is what the *novelist* can represent. Instead of math, we get the Maserati, the rare violin, the family connection to the atom bomb, and their star-crossed love for each other.

But this only returns us to the problem. Why are Bobby and Alicia written up as mathematicians rather than, respectively, as a race-car driver and a violinist? If neither character can be caught in the act of uttering or creating an original mathematical idea, then, curiously enough, these are merely novels about the idea of mathematical ideas. Practically speaking, this means that Bobby and Alicia must sound like "geniuses" while delivering clever and diligently knowing reports (full of famous names, and so on) on twentieth-century developments in physics and mathematics aimed at ordinary, non-mathematical readers. These are novels in love with the idea of scientific and musical genius. And how do geniuses sound? They speak rapidly and gnomically, impatient with their sluggish interlocutors. They are willful, eccentric, solitary. They are in mental crisis, close to breakdown and suicide. They are imperious around success and failure: they announce that they stopped playing the violin because it was impossible to be in the world's top ten. They are obsessed with intelligence, their own and other people's. Of Robert Oppenheimer, Bobby says, "A lot of very smart people thought he was possibly the smartest man God ever made," while Alicia says, "People who knew Einstein, Dirac, von Neumann, said that he was the smartest man they'd ever met."

Do geniuses actually sound like this? Well, people who are fixated on the idea of genius perhaps sound like this. But out of this miming of genius—which, alas, is what McCarthy appears to be doing in these books—comes at least one telling idea, both a correlate and a symptom of the novelist's apparent love affair with the grand performance of higher mathematics. It's the idea that words are latecomers to truth, trailing numbers and music. This comes close to Pythagoras' idea that numbers encode divinity—mathematics and music are taken to be symbolic languages with a direct connection to truth, whereas language is a comparatively belated human creation that clumsily approximates the truth. Alicia puts it directly: "And intelligence is numbers. It's not words. Words are things we've made up. Mathematics is not." When Dr. Cohen asks her how we have come to this idea that "intelligence is numerical," she replies that "maybe we actually got there by counting. For a million years before the first word was ever said. If you want an IQ of over a hundred and fifty you'd better be good with numbers." Elsewhere, Alicia invokes Schopenhauer to the effect that "if the universe vanished music alone would remain."

So music and mathematics come before language, and they come after language; they may outlive us all. We made language up, but we found mathematics, premade. This sort of Platonism is commonplace among mathematicians and musicians (a character in "The Passenger" calls Bobby a "mathematical platonist"). But note how Alicia, or the novelist who created her, arrives at this insight: not by arguing it as such but via the barstool admiration of sheer mathematical I.Q. Intelligence just *is* numbers, while words are left scudding along the lower levels. To traffic in serious mathematics is to commune with truth; to traffic in words, to merely write novels, is to produce dim approximations of the truth. This is what too many colloquies at the Santa Fe Institute will do to a novelist's self-esteem.

Things get interesting when this mathematical mysticism is subjected to McCarthy's characteristic tragic Gnosticism. A religious believer might conclude that the truth mathematics encodes can only be God's truth, and that God is therefore a mathematician. Dr. Cohen puts this to Alicia, and she demurs, because she doesn't appear to believe in God. The great mathematician Kurt Gödel seems to have been some kind of Deist, who believed that mathematics does not merely represent truths inherent in the universe but reveals the universe's higher design. Alicia is lured by such Deism—what she calls, in McCarthyish language, the idea of mathematics as "some shimmering palimpsest of eternal abidement." But she can't quite bring herself to accept that the universe is intelligent in this way, or that mathematics, as Platonism holds, discloses truths that can be independent of human life. If the world is not intelligent, then when it finally explodes or melts or runs out of oxygen all human intelligence will disappear, including music and mathematics. Schopenhauer had it wrong. For Gödel, mathematics presumably had no limits, and its truths persist even after the last human being has quit the world, Alicia speculates. She doesn't believe that; consideration of the end of the world appears to mark the limit of her faith in the "religious" primacy of mathematics.

Like her brother, like most of McCarthy's earlier protagonists, Alicia is a Gnostic pessimist. She believes that the world has been abandoned by God, or that, at best, we are involved in a terrible struggle with a substitute God, a diabolical deity. "At the core of reality," she says, "lies a deep and eternal demonium." At the age of ten or so, Alicia felt the presence of this diabolical God. She had a dream vision of a gate, and she sensed that beyond this gate

was a terrible presence that she could not see, or bear to see. She calls this Devil figure the Archatron. Now, if the only deity is in fact the Devil, and the world is the Devil's creation, must mathematics, which tells the truth about this diabolical world, itself be diabolical? What if mathematics is the Archatron? Alicia doesn't explicitly say so, but the idea haunts these two novels, for reasons that are obvious enough. In the twentieth century, mathematics enabled the invention of a bomb that could extinguish human life. Famously, Oppenheimer said that, when he witnessed the Trinity explosion, a phrase from the Bhagavad Gita came to mind: "I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." The world turned Gnostic in 1945. Or, as Alicia puts it: "The world has created no living thing it does not intend to destroy." Bobby reflects that he owes his existence to Adolf Hitler (his parents met at Oak Ridge), that "the forces of history which had ushered his troubled life into the tapestry were those of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, the sister events that sealed forever the fate of the West."

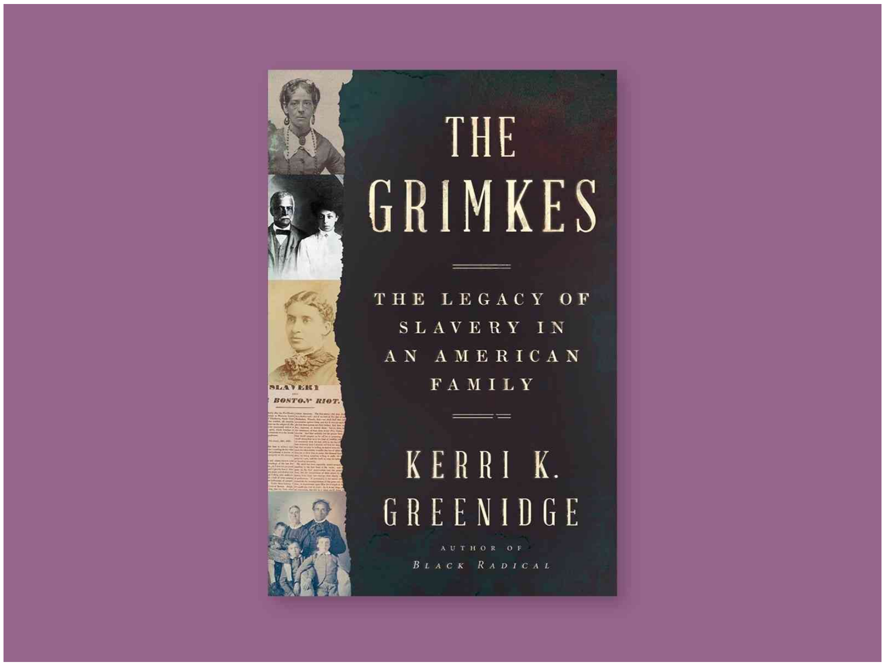
Sure enough, the area where McCarthy can be authoritatively eloquent—can be himself—is the realm not of numbers, where he has only the idea of "genius," but of metaphysics, where he has all the resources of language. The new and welcome thing in "The Passenger" and "Stella Maris" is the lucidity of this bitter metaphysics. McCarthy's earlier books were so shrouded in obscurity, rang with so much hieratic shrieking and waving, that it was perfectly possible to extract five contradictory theological ideas at once from their fiery depths. That was why "The Road" could be read as both Beckettian pessimism and last-ditch Christian optimism, with its orphaned little boy left, at the end, to carry with him the light of the divine and the flame of the human. Can the world be repaired or not? Is it divinely intelligent or not? These new novels flush McCarthy out of his rhetorical cover, and his decidedly austere and unillusioned answer to both of these questions is no. In a world lit by the "evil sun" of nuclear invention, all history, Bobby thinks, is nothing more than "a rehearsal for its own extinction." And, when the world finally kills itself off, nothing will be left—not words, not music, not mathematics, not God. Not even the Devil. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

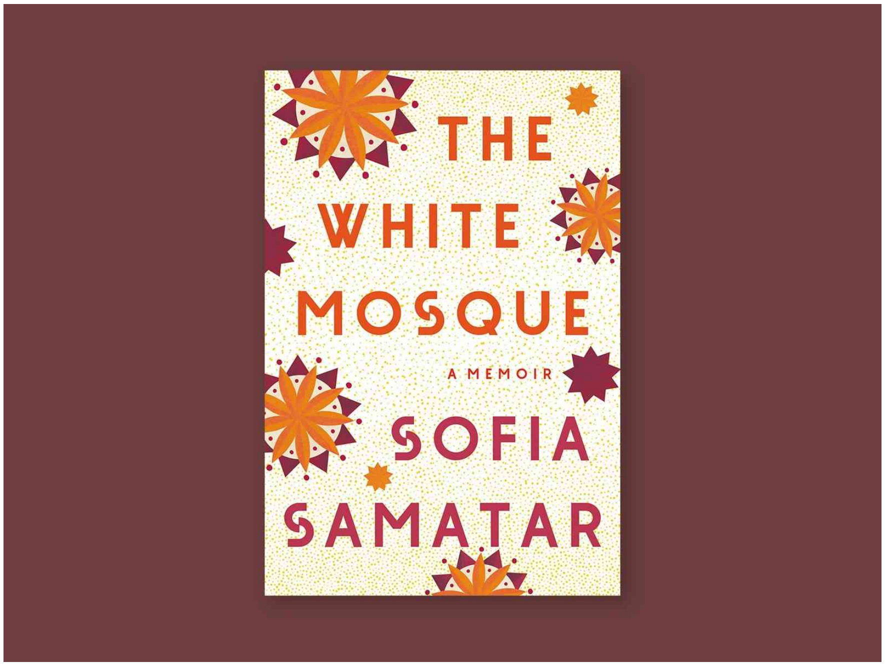
By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch



The Grimkes, *by Kerri K. Greenidge (Liveright)*. This multilayered history follows branches of a family of Southern slaveholders. On one side, there are the abolitionist sisters Angelina Grimke Weld and Sarah Grimke; on the other, stemming from their brother's relationship with an enslaved woman named Nancy Weston, are Archibald Grimke, a co-founder of the N.A.A.C.P., and his daughter, the writer Angelina Weld Grimke. The story opens in the eighteen-twenties, with the sisters quitting South Carolina for Philadelphia, where they encountered a vibrant Black-led abolitionist movement; only much later did they acknowledge their Black relatives. Greenidge faithfully documents the sisters' activism, but her real concern is exploring the limits of white sympathy, a story vividly animated by her nuanced biographical portraits.

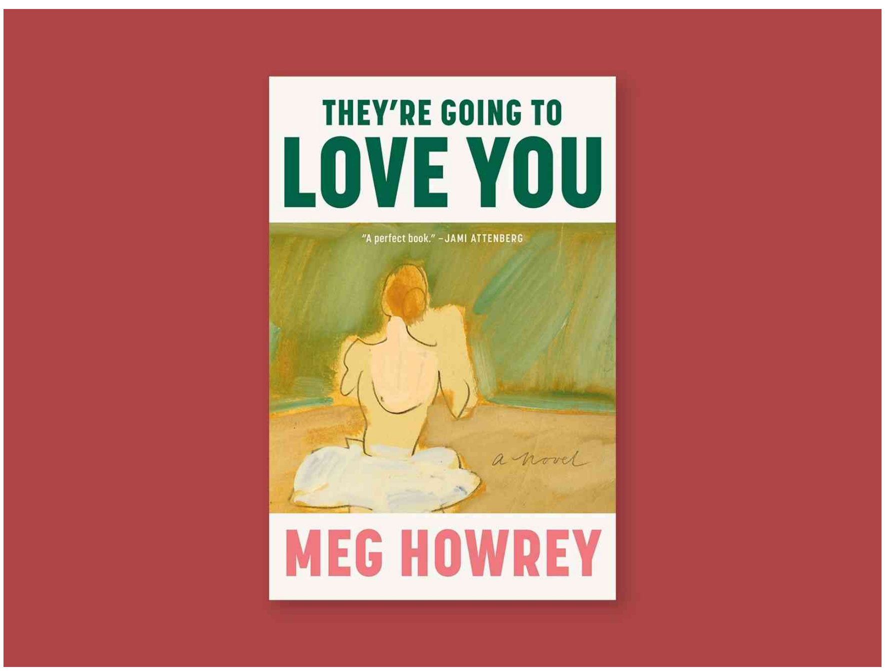


The White Mosque, *by Sofia Samatar (Catapult)*. Born to an American Mennonite mother and a Somali-born father, the author of this "palimpsestic quest" through Central Asia follows a group of nineteenth-century Mennonites who travelled from Ukraine to Uzbekistan to await the return of Jesus. Samatar blends travelogue with a larger meditation on faith, community, and colonization. She details the sense of alienation felt by many non-white Mennonites, including her own experiences dealing with racist gibes at school, and the patronizing attitudes that can underpin charitable efforts in the developing world. But she also acknowledges the sense of "tradition, community, mutual aid" that the faith offers. As a fellow-traveller reminds her, "You can' t be a Mennonite alone."

The Best Books of 2022

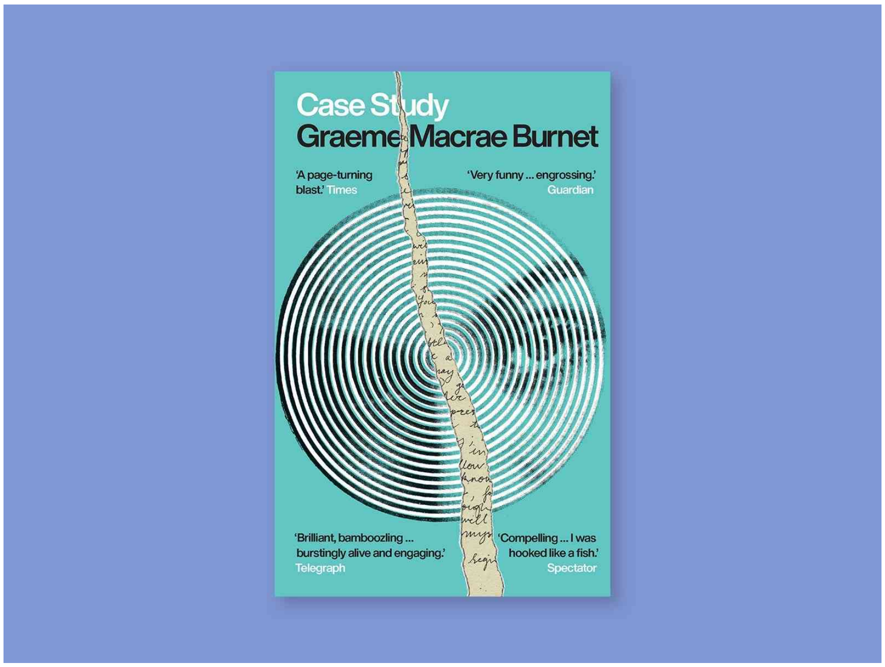


Read our reviews of the year's notable new fiction and nonfiction.



They're Going to Love You, *by Meg Howrey (Doubleday)*. "What I did was *forgivable*," the narrator of this ruminative novel insists. Her offense, which brought about a rupture with her father years ago, is not immediately revealed. Now a former dancer trying to make it as a choreographer, she

grapples with her father's impending death by recalling wide-eyed adolescent visits to the Greenwich Village brownstone where he and his boyfriend nurtured gay artists at the height of the *AIDS* crisis. A lifelong sense that she is "no one's best" has resulted in a string of arm's-length adult relationships, she realizes, but her careful arrangement of the final farewell produces a late drive toward love and reconciliation.



Case Study, *by Graeme Macrae Burnet (Biblioasis)*. Ostensibly a collection of found documents assembled by a would-be biographer, this novel revolves around the nineteen-sixties fame and subsequent eclipse of an English therapist, Arthur Collins Braithwaite, who hoped to "bring down the 'jerry-built edifice' of psychiatry." The novel switches between a documentary examination of Braithwaite's life (including a retinue of historical figures, such as R. D. Laing) and the extravagant suspicions of a woman who, blaming him for her sister's suicide, enrolls as his patient, under the alias Rebecca Smyth, to investigate. With its layers of imposture and unreliability, the novel suggests that our personhood is far more malleable than we believe.

By Hannah Gold

By Maggie Doherty

Comment

- A Supreme Court Case That Threatens the Mechanisms of Democracy

A Supreme Court Case That Threatens the Mechanisms of Democracy

At stake in Moore v. Harper is the question of how elections should be run—and who should resolve the inevitable disputes when they arise.

By Andrew Marantz



Before last month's midterm election, progressives—and centrists, and socialists, and anyone, really, who thought that it was a bad idea to put election deniers in charge of state elections—braced for a red wave. When it didn't hit, many of those people, for a moment, felt something like relief. And yet, for anyone inclined to commemorate the dodging of one bullet by scanning the horizon for the next, there was still plenty of cause for concern. If the optimistic view was that the electorate had rebuked the *MAGA* agenda and saved democracy, a take offered by the political scientists Lynn Vavreck, John Sides, and Chris Tausanovitch was more sobering: voters' identities have become so "calcified" that, no matter what happens (inflation, a global pandemic, an impeachment or two), party loyalists will still show up to vote for their side, or against the other. This is obviously not an ideal way to run a democracy. And that's setting aside the most glaring reason for Democrats to worry: even if they could win a lasting majority and pass robust legislation,

those achievements could be unwound by an increasingly emboldened and reactionary Supreme Court.

The Court has had its relatively expansive eras, but it has not been a reliable engine of progress. Last year, in the *Harvard Law Review*, the law professor Nikolas Bowie called the Supreme Court "the ultimate source of antidemocracy in the United States"—and he was writing before the late-June bout of extraordinary (and extraordinarily unpopular) decisions, including the overturning of Roe v. Wade. This term, the Court seems prepared to curtail gay rights, to prevent President Biden from forgiving student debt, and to reverse decades of precedent regarding affirmative action. But the most ominous cases may be those concerning the mechanisms of democracy itself: how elections should be run and who should resolve the inevitable disputes that arise.

In October, the Court heard Merrill v. Milligan, a case about redistricting in Alabama. More than a quarter of Alabama's residents are Black, but the state legislature had created a gerrymandered map with just one majority-Black congressional district, out of seven. The challengers argued that this violated the Voting Rights Act. During oral argument, Alabama's attorney contended that the state could create districts only in a "race-neutral" manner; to take race into account, he said, would violate the Fourteenth Amendment. Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, in her second day on the bench, responded with a pointed history lesson, explaining to him—and, by extension, to her six colleagues not named Kagan or Sotomayor—why a race-neutral reading of the Fourteenth Amendment got it precisely backward. "I understood that we looked at the history and traditions of the Constitution—at what the Framers and the Founders thought about," she said. "The Framers themselves adopted the Equal Protection Clause, the Fourteenth Amendment, the Fifteenth Amendment, in a race-conscious way." Her conservative colleagues didn't successfully refute her position; instead, they mostly ignored it.

Justice Jackson's allusion to "history and traditions" may have been a dig at Justice Samuel Alito, who, in his majority opinion in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, wrote that "a right to abortion is not deeply rooted in the nation's history and traditions." More broadly, it was a challenge to fair-weather originalists: you can't purport to care about the

original intentions of the Framers only when those intentions happen to align with yours. Except that, in fact, you can. As Alito and his allies have demonstrated, you can do whatever you want as long as you have the votes, and all the public can do is complain.

The final oral argument of the year took place last Wednesday, in Moore v. Harper, a North Carolina redistricting case. The law professor Rick Hasen has called it "the eight-hundred-pound gorilla" of election law; the conservative former judge J. Michael Luttig referred to it as "the gravest threat to American democracy today." The case turns on what is called the independent state-legislature theory, first found, in its contemporary form, in Chief Justice William Rehnquist's concurrence in Bush v. Gore, which held that, according to the Constitution, the Court was bound to side with the Florida state legislature (which meant favoring Bush) and against the Florida state court (which meant favoring Gore). There's a lot to say about I.S.L.T.—the Justices spent nearly three hours discussing it, twice as much time as allocated—but, in its strongest form, it's so doctrinally flimsy that it may not deserve to be called a theory at all.

The basic notion is that, because the Elections Clause of the Constitution gives state legislatures the power to administer federal elections, decisions about those elections—whether districts can be egregiously gerrymandered, whether voters need I.D., whether they can vote early or by mail, and so on—can be made by the legislatures alone, unconstrained by state constitutions and unreviewable by state courts. (An even more nightmarish version of the theory could extend a similar logic to the Electors Clause, opening up the possibility that rogue state legislatures could put forward alternate slates of Presidential electors, as some tried to do in 2020.) At oral argument, Justice Jackson again tried to show that that's not how any of this works. "In order for us to have a thing called the legislature, we have to look at the state constitution," she said. Alito, for his part, mocked the respondents for citing the English Bill of Rights (more selective originalism), and then, according to Slate's Mark Joseph Stern, resorted to "rhythmically thumping the bench, which he tends to do when he tries and fails to pin down counsel."

It would be the height of fair-weather originalism, not to mention fair-weather federalism, for the conservatives on the Court to prevent state courts from engaging in judicial review. But at least four Justices have already

taken I.S.L.T. seriously enough to grant cert in the case; they would need only to persuade a fifth. Surprisingly, Justices Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett, in their questions, seemed skeptical of some aspects of the theory, if not ready to abandon it altogether. If the decision is muddled, or narrow—or if, perhaps, there is no majority opinion—concerned citizens would be forgiven for again feeling a measure of relief. When democracy dodges a bullet, this merits celebration. At some point, though, it would also make sense to do something about all the loaded guns lying around, waiting for someone to fire them. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

Crossword

- The Crossword: Wednesday, December 7, 2022

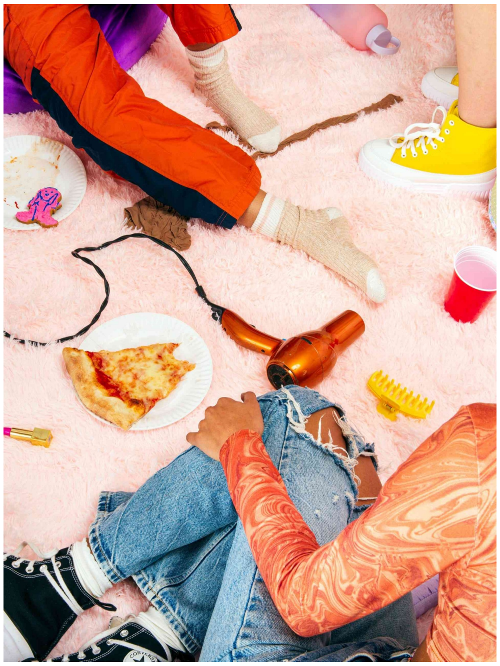
By Patrick Berry

Fiction

- **“The Other Party”**

The Other Party

By [Matthew Klam]



***Audio:** Matthew Klam reads.*

My daughter walked into the house with a boy named Brendan. She came into the kitchen limping a little, her mascara smeared, and lay down on the floor in front of the stove. I was dipping a cookie in icing, checking the color to see if it needed more green. Every year, in December, our block had a Christmas-cookie swap, a ritual that had become one of the less disgusting parts of the holiday season.

I was home a lot and took care of things, the cooking and the house stuff. Before being home a lot, I'd worked on a TV show in Los Angeles. It was shot on two gigantic stages at a movie studio in Burbank, near a building shaped like a wizard hat that you could see from the Ventura Freeway. I was out there for a year, living in a canyon above Sunset, and missed my kid so badly that when I passed the playground of the elementary school in Toluca Lake I had to pull over, smoke a cigarette, and cry.

All day long, a dozen of us sat around a big table in a dark room writing a soapy drama about an inner-city hospital, for a guy who'd optioned my

novel and wanted me to learn the ropes. He said I had potential, and he thought of what he was giving me as a priceless education, one that came with specific instructions—like a Fabergé egg he wanted me to stick up my ass, to keep it safe. But then he got angry and forgot about the egg and kicked me so hard that it shattered, and while I was bleeding to death he blamed me for breaking it.

Matthew Klam on the weirdness of *COVID*.

When he fired me, I came home, and a few months later the pandemic hit. I did the shopping and the driving and the cleaning. I figured out how to vacuum inside the radiator, and at night I'd close my eyes and see the top rack of the dishwasher. My wife, Monica, moved her practice online, and I'd hear her down in the basement, not the words or even the tone so much as the endlessness of it, with her patients onscreen, in states of dislocation and despair, as she put in more hours than she had in her entire life. Before the TV show, I'd been a serious writer with big ambitions, but supporting a family was a whole other thing. I lived in a little cage now, which I'd built for myself, and I was comfortable in it. I was like a housekeeper who folded underpants and got laid. My wife was either the customer or the boss: she and our daughter came first, and everything hinged on nobody being mad at me. In the spring, we got vaccinated, and, in the fall, they went back to school and the office.

I was examining the test cookie in the light, by a window that overlooked a row of back yards, while listening to Christmas music and wondering when to start dinner. I felt protected by the holiday, and by this baking and the neighborly union to come. Like our Labor Day block party, which featured beer pong and a spoon race, the cookie party made the world feel smaller and saner, and I was happy to have Rachel safely at home, and Brendan in the doorway, looking down at her with a stupid expression. We referred to this flopping-down-anywhere thing she sometimes did as "floor time."

They'd ridden their bikes home from school. And even though it was cold and rainy and the middle of December, Rachel was wearing a tank top, a pink-and-white miniskirt, yellow platform sneakers, and a little furry gray jacket. She was fifteen, and tanned, because she swam on a team that practiced outdoors all winter in a heated pool. The dog came in and sniffed

her smooth golden legs while she stared up at the ceiling through greenish-pinkish makeup I'd never seen before. The dog leaned in and licked her eye. She screamed.

Brendan stepped over her and sat at the table. He looked at the cookies. He played basketball and was about six feet four and a hundred and thirty pounds, and lately, having grown so fast, he found it hard to do almost anything with his arms and legs. His pants were too short, and his sneakers were the size of casserole pans. He had beautiful, shining, shoulder-length hair and the baby face he'd had all his life.

It was Friday, and I asked whether they were done riding around. No one answered. "I have to decorate those," I said to Brendan. "You two can help." He glanced at Rachel, then at me. I looked back at her. I'd figured that those streaks at the corners of her eyes were from the cold, but on closer examination it seemed she'd been crying, or was still crying. She looked at her phone, her hands pink from the cold, and on the screen I saw the bright, anxious face of Kendra. Under Kendra, in a smaller box, was the less bright, less stable Maggie, in a bathrobe.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice
Listen to Matthew Klam read "The Other Party."

Maggie said, "I'm insecure about my grades. You're insecure about your looks. She's insecure about her weight."

"Today was the first time she ever wore a bra," Kendra said. "She's needed one for about a year." They were talking, I knew, about Lily Hofbrauer.

Rachel said, "My dad is listening," then made a kind of groan. "Lily told Vivie Herrera I have a crooked face."

She turned to me with her dark eyes and dark, wavy hair, her long, narrow, beautiful face, her jaw veering slightly left. She'd been a child gymnast, competing around the mid-Atlantic, and every inch of her body had been scrutinized for how it looked and how it moved. The girls on the team had been vicious, so she'd got used to the insults and laughed them off, but she also always cried.

“Lily thinks she’s perfect,” Brendan said. “People tell her she’s hot.” He tapped his temple. “It gets to the head.”

“*Goes* to her head,” I said.

Rachel cried on the floor.

When they were little, Lily had told her that witches lived in tree stumps, and the tooth fairy was your parents. Time had passed since then, but still. She lived two blocks away, and drank all our milk. On nights when Lily slept over, she and Rachel wore each other’s T-shirts, and lay in bed eating from the same container, watching a movie on the same phone. They had a way of cycling through phases—hugging, cuddling, and humping each other, then insulting and attacking. They’d been friends since pre-K, and I assumed this pattern of abuse would go on forever.

I nudged Rachel with my shoe, signalling with my eyes that Lily was an idiot, and she signalled back that she would never recover, and when she didn’t get up off the floor I kicked her.

She stood up and sat next to Brendan, gazing at the decorating stuff with a look of despair that washed over me. She wiped her face. They used the green icing on trees and put silver dots on them. They went on Lily’s Instagram and made fun of a comment she’d written to a boy on Brendan’s basketball team, and laughed at a photo of her sticking out her ass, and at how his teammates referred to her as “the Predator,” talking like I wasn’t there, or was deaf, or dead. They used chocolate kisses to make tits on snowmen, and sprinkles to make bikinis. There was a second batch baking in the oven.

•

I ate the test cookie and looked out the window. The sky had cleared. I felt a quiet, steady glow come over me. I was grateful and sensitive to everything.

I liked our neighborhood. I liked or even loved many of my neighbors, and had become closer to them during the pandemic, on the many Saturday nights we’d spent choking on smoke around a bonfire, freezing or in the

humidity and mosquitoes, half hysterical after getting sick or getting fired. I knew about these families' window treatments and pancreatic tumors, their career sorrows and bathroom potpourri, their childhood traumas and prosthetic testicles. I knew whose bedroom light burned in the middle of the night, whose sink disposal jammed and how to fix it, who had died at ninety-four and been found fully clothed on top of his blankets, and how long he'd been there. His name was Herman Grunst. He hadn't looked a day over eighty-five. I'd seen newspapers piling up outside his house, and should've gone over to check on him. Someone else finally did. We all helped one another when a car battery died, or when someone needed to borrow the wet vac after a basement had flooded and rugs and furniture were piled up in the front yard. We came out of our houses with good or terrible news, holding it like a baby, and flung it at whoever was there.

Last Halloween, two doors down, a law librarian named Patty had lain in a cardboard coffin on her porch, dressed as Dracula, and jump-scared even the two-year-old next door, who leaped about ten feet into her brother's arms. A guy named Scott, who used to live across the street, had been seeing hookers for seventeen years, when he fell in love with his deputy at the Department of Commerce. His wife, Jenny, found their e-mails, and threw him out; she threw him out more than once, actually, loudly enough for some of us to piece together what had happened. Now Scott lived alone, in a studio half a mile away, and was doing all kinds of psychotherapy, while hiding his pension and threatening his ex. His kids had stopped speaking to him, and Jenny had become isolated and nocturnal.

From the kitchen window, I watched my neighbor Ruth walk down her back steps in the yard behind mine. She and her husband, Terry, were hosting the cookie party this year. They had a screened-in gazebo, and a slate patio with a stone fire pit that had seen regular use during the pandemic. Their back door opened, and Terry came out.

He was two years younger than me, fair-haired, left-handed, half Jewish, from the Midwest, and calm—though he and Ruth had fights and threw plates, but that was some insanity they brought out in each other. Terry and I were close. The rain from my gutters poured into his basement. The same woodpecker attacked the soffits on both of our houses. He and I ran together at the track sometimes or played tennis, and he'd go apeshit on the court,

beat the crap out of me, then feel bad. Once, we were carrying a couch into his basement and I forgot to close the door and his son, Theo, fell down the stairs. Another time, Rachel barfed all over the inside of his new car. He had this belted leather jacket he'd bought in Italy that made him look like some kind of sleazy dentist. He'd catch me in the yard with the dog at, like, 6 *A.M.* and yell out the window, "Who do I have to beat up to get socks like that?" He wrote terrible rhyming poems for his kids' birthdays. He'd solemnly mention Theo's passion for Mars, or Daphne, the volleyball ace who might become a doctor, his voice turning reedy and sombre, as if he were some ancient forebear squinting into the stars to discern patterns in the growing season.

But there was this fog of feeling around him now that exhausted me, and as I watched him I started to fall apart.

"Five more days of school," Brendan said to Rachel. "Then two weeks off." He mentioned plans for ice skating and paintball.

Terry started to move a patio chaise, and Ruth turned as he sank down and sort of sat on the ground, then fell backward into the azaleas, so that only one gray ankle boot stuck out from the bushes. Donna Boyle came out of Ruth and Terry's back door in brightly colored running gear and went down the steps. A flowerpot fell off the deck and smashed. What the hell.

Ruth took her husband's hand and tried to pull him up, but he was too heavy. Donna went back into the house. Ruth's brother, Kyle, was there, too, staring like a moron through the back door. Somewhere my cell phone rang. I had to get the rest of the cookies out of the oven and put in dinner, a chicken thing with red wine and pearl onions I'd made a thousand times. Someone knocked on my front door. I picked up a decorated tree and crammed it into my mouth over the objections of the decorators, because everything in this house was mine.

It was Donna. Her son, Benji, mowed my lawn.

"You never answer your phone."

"I saw from the kitchen," I said.

“I guess he needed to move some chairs.”

“I’d help but I’m supervising cookie decorators.”

She squinted at me.

“Why can’t Kyle get him up?”

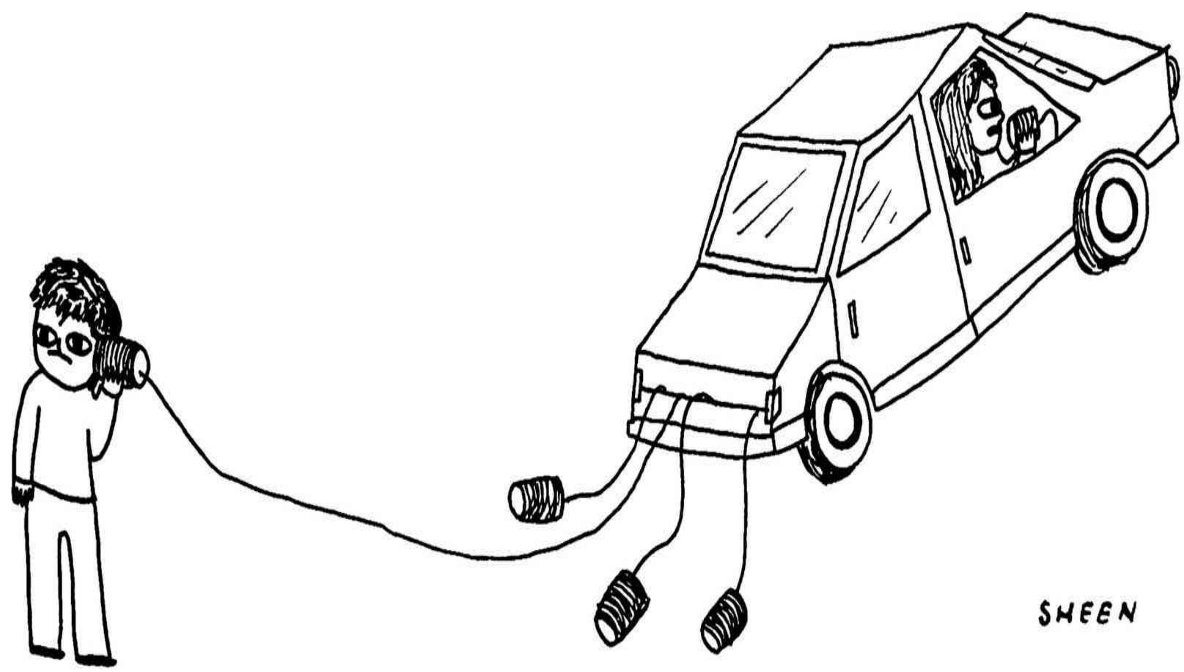
“Shoulder surgery.”

“Oh, sure, stupid Trumper *MAGA* fucking asshole.”

She waited for me to finish. “Can I tell you something awful?”

“Sure.”

“They were hoping it was M.S. or Parkinson’s, but it’s the other one, the baseball guy.”



“Hey, I got married.”
Cartoon by Justin Sheen

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I already knew. It had started one morning in October. He was standing in their bathroom, and ripped the shower-curtain rod out of the wall trying to stay up. A week later, Ruth needed help getting him off their bedroom floor.

She called me and I happened to be home because it was three o'clock in the morning.

"I have to turn off the oven," I told Donna. "Be there in a sec."

I was afraid, and felt disgusted with myself for being afraid, and for how lucky I was. I was healthy, and I clung to my health, and loved it. And if I got sick or injured, which happened sometimes, I recovered quickly, in a rage of vitality, and was again unsympathetic to people with legitimate complaints. Your health is the only thing that matters, truly, unless you have it, in which case it's irrelevant.

I didn't want to go over there.

I went into the kitchen. The oven was off. The cookies were on the rack. Rachel had done it. A teaspoon that didn't belong to us had been sitting on the counter for months. It had Ruth and Terry's initials on it. I grabbed the spoon and went out.

•

Past Karen Ziti's house, around the side of Ruth and Terry's, I breathed slowly to calm myself. I'd spent the pandemic trying to avoid getting sick and dying, trying not to think about the millions who were suffering or dead. I'd worked hard to block out what was happening, and I was good at it. Donna was not as good at it, because she had to deal with things like breast cancer, which she'd told me about one morning before the lockdown, blurted it out by the recycling cans, trembling as she told me. I hugged her, could feel the heat coming off her as I held her. She got chemo and radiation that blew out her immune system, and I forgot about it. Then last year, in the fall, during the peak of the pandemic, her dad died of *Covid*. She had to drive out to the Maryland boonies to pick up her parents' mail while her mom was in mourning in Florida. She had to fill in their absentee ballots, both parents', for Trump, even though she hated that fucker and her dad was dead. The mom said it had been his dying wish.

From the moment Terry had told me, I'd understood what was happening. I knew about the disease, and how it went. My dad's little brother, my uncle

Les, he'd had it, and I remember coming home from college and losing a grip on him as he fell to the ground beside my father's car, telling him I was sorry over and over as his kids looked on, aghast. He and his wife had moved across the state to be closer to my parents, and I remember wheeling him around a grocery store, almost forgetting that he was there. It was like something from a horror movie, except that it was actually from real life. With Terry, I'd developed a plan for enduring the weeks and months and whatever lay ahead. I would rally around him, acting calm and joyful and full of hope. I'd get excited for new research or a drug trial, then days or weeks would pass while I walked the dog the other way to keep from going by his house. At the cookie party, for instance, I could ignore his illness by counting the hours until the end of the night—four hours, give or take, that was easy enough.

At the gate, I heard voices and froze, trying to think of something to say. Then I was on the other side of the gate, beside Kyle. It was getting dark and the fairy lights had come on. I saw the lit-up tree in Alan's living room, one house over, Alan at the sink, and there things looked plausible and real. When I saw Terry on the ground, I wanted to burst into tears and run away, but my personality functioned like a system of gears and wires. Ruth and Donna wore expressions of concern, standing over his long, broad, bent body. They looked like lawyers, and were both, in fact, lawyers who defended whistle-blowers and knew each other professionally. Terry looked up at us, the skin pulled taut across his big handsome skull.

"Counsellor," I said to Ruth. "Counsellor," I said to Donna. I was flushed and couldn't modulate my stupidity. "And how's this little fellow?"

"I'm fine," Terry said. "I just can't get up."

A chair cushion had been placed under Terry's back, between the azaleas, which seemed pathetic. Ruth was a pale, puffy-lipped beauty, but she looked spent. This cookie party was going to suck, but I was determined to see it through with the emotional range and cool efficiency of a well-trained hospice worker.

"Here," I said to Terry. "It's your spoon."

Neither of them reached out to take it. I placed it on the wooden step. Crab-walking behind him, breaking branches, I leaned over him and said, “I made tea at your house and it came home with my cup.” His shoulders were rounded and his arms were bulky. I reached under his armpits as though I did this every day.

“Well, good,” he said. “Because that’s our only spoon.” His hair smelled a little fruity. “I had to eat my cereal this morning with a fork.”

“That’s what I figured.”

“O.K.,” he said. “Get me up.” I could feel myself not wanting to touch his body, aware of the nearness and inevitability and inscrutability of his disease. The truth was that I was mad at him for getting sick, and for letting me ignore him, and I put that rage into lifting him and it almost broke my pelvis.

He held on to the railing, arm shaking. A tremor—that was new. I brushed the dirt off his back and said, “I love you, Terry.” I reminded him to yell, day or night, if he needed me, but then Ruth said, “Oh,” at the sight of a gash on his elbow and blood running down. Donna picked up pieces of broken pottery, ignoring the symbolism, and swept the dirt against the house.

He didn’t flinch at my declaration of love, just held the railing. Ruth got a Band-Aid and pressed a piece of skin back into place, and as she did I saw the ghost of his atrophied self, his withered corpse molded around a breathing machine with the sour stench of saliva.

Donna and I arranged the chairs in the yard. I shut the doors to the shed, and picked up twigs and branches that had dropped from the big oak tree and threw them in the fire pit, glancing over to see if he’d fallen down again.

The oak tree shaded several back yards and came under some designation from the city and could not be removed. When the neighborhood had been laid out, it was already here. Now it was eighty or ninety feet tall, with shaggy bark, and its branches went out in fractals. Undisturbed, it might live hundreds of years. I looked into the highest parts and had that sensation

where your soul soars up, everything resets, and you feel oneness. This city had started as a campfire. None of us would be here when it ended.

•

Around that time, I later learned, Rachel and Brendan were putting a plan into motion that would include some of his teammates, various alibis, contraband, fake I.D.s, and parental and curfew countermeasures in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia.

"Who's that?" Rachel asked, while decorating cookies. They were looking at Brendan's phone.

"Caveman."

"And that?"

"D Dog."

She pointed to another boy.

"Arthur Plevins."

Rachel was impressed. Brendan described the outfit he'd be wearing later, down to his track pants and Nike socks, and she wondered if he might finally get some action. Not from her, but maybe from someone. Before hitting Send, she looked at him. "Are we doing this?"

"You're the host."

"Ugh, fine, whatever. I want to be asleep by twelve-thirty."

•

I went back through the alley and yelled "Fuck" in my head a few times and thought, My friend is sick, and felt a little like dying, but stopped when I saw Kyle's blue Hyundai, with an *Epoch Times* sticker in the back window, and one on his bumper with a picture of an assault weapon and "*come and take it from me.*" My lungs opened at the thrill of hating him, and I imagined

all kinds of things. I wanted to roll out the guillotine, partition this country, and have the other half bow to my will or be slaughtered.

Walking back to my house, I saw the light-up Christmas Yoda in Carmella's yard, and the collection of blue glass bottles in the window above her kitchen sink. I walked right past Denny or Danny, who had fallen down the stairs, drunk, on Thanksgiving and gone to the E.R. in an ambulance. I saw neighbors going in and out of houses. The modest size of our houses, the tree boxes by the street, the front porches so close to the sidewalk that when you sat out there every asshole who passed by said hello—it was all by design and it worked. We were kind and sociable, and had compassion for our sick friends.

Alan's three daughters sat on the sidewalk in front of their house. They'd filled a sand pail with holly berries and were placing the bright-red beads in the seams of the pavement with concentration and small fingers. Kira, the oldest, looked up as I approached and called out to me as though we'd been conversing for hours.

"I have to tell you," she said, with a red nose and her hat on crooked. "I saw Rachel's friends going by on bicycles, and the tall girl had a fur coat and braids."

"That was Rachel," I said. "She let her hair grow out."

Kira had a glint in her eye. "How does she pedal her bike in those shoes?"

"I don't know. She's home if you want to ask her."

"Does she have a boyfriend?"

"Ask her."

Eva, the middle girl, twisted her mouth and said, "My sister loves Brian."

"So that's his name."

"No, I don't," Kira said. "He actually drives me nuts."

They still had holly berries in the pail and were steadily filling in the cracks.

“What are you doing?”

Kira looked unsure of what to call it. She sat beside a tiny box made of soft-looking, untreated wood, and on the lid neatly written in pencil was “Miss Selena Gillmez, March 11–December 15, 2021.” I pointed to the box and raised my eyebrows. Kira handed it to me. I flipped up the brass clasp. Lola, the baby, trained her Milk Dud eyes on me. There, in its final resting place, was a fancy goldfish with long fins, the color drained from it, now a dull silvery purple.

Eva looked like Kira, but Lola had her own look, with short, thin, flyaway hair. She was wearing a blue corduroy jacket with a white fluted collar and an embroidered coat of arms on the breast pocket—of a bunny and two carrots—and it took me a second to recognize the jacket, passed down from us and originating as a gift from my mother.

Alan came out. He was tall and dark with a long nose and skinny legs. With his neatly trimmed mustache, he looked a lot like Inspector Clouseau. He’d been born in Tehran, but when the war started he and his siblings were sent to France. He was actually Alain, but I felt stupid calling him that. He had a thick French accent that made it impossible to take him seriously.

“What happened over there?” He’d seen me in Ruth and Terry’s yard.

“He fell.”

“It’s his ankle?”

I wasn’t supposed to say, though he’d find out soon enough. Fuck it, I spilled the beans.

“Oh, my God,” Alan said. “What can he do?”

I felt queasy, and thought I might faint. There were no treatments, aside from assisted suicide and a few experimental drugs that didn’t work.

He said, “It’s the worst thing that can ever happen to a person.”

“Is it?” I couldn’t take that ridiculous accent.

“What?”

“You lived through a war and your family lost everything and a bunch of them got killed.”

“Well, yeah, that wasn’t good, either.”

I turned toward the curb, thinking maybe I’d puke in the street.

“We’ll help however we can,” Alan said. He worked as an oil analyst, spoke five languages, and travelled constantly. He was never home.

His house had been new when he and his wife moved in, built to look like the bungalows around it, but bigger, taller, crisp, and white, with twenty-foot ceilings and a sleek modern kitchen like something on a space station. I forgave him for the house, and for the job it came from—creating data more valuable than the resource itself, which was helping to fry the planet.

“It’s all so pointless,” I said. “I feel sick.”

“Nausea,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Not you. The novel.” He meant a book by Sartre, about a guy who feels like throwing up because death is real and life has no meaning. “I read it a long time ago,” he said. There was some epiphany at the end but he couldn’t remember it. “Let’s go, girls. Time for dinner. Leave the fish outside.”

•

Back in my house, I could feel things going wrong, medicines in the bathroom with the caps not twisted on correctly, houseplants wheezing by the radiators. I heard a voice and glanced around the corner. Rachel and the aforementioned Lily Hofbrauer lay on the couch like lovers, their arms and legs entwined. They were holding a phone over their heads, posing into it.

Brendan sat watching them with their big eyes and pink cheeks and long hair parted in the middle, like fairy-tale princesses.

I pulled the chicken out of the fridge. Someone had hacked the animal into pieces, and I had then marinated it in red wine, Cognac, thyme, and a bay leaf. I incinerated slices of bacon and browned the chicken parts. While I chopped carrots, I tried to piece together from the rumble of Lily's and Rachel's voices what they were saying. An apology, I figured, for the crack Lily had made about Rachel's face.

"You don't sound sorry," Rachel said.

Lily said, "A kid in my acting class told me I should do porn."

"Oh, God, ya," Rachel said.

Lily said, "Are you stupid? Seriously, are you dumb?"

I couldn't hear what Rachel said.

"I have wide hips and big tits and I feel like a fucking bimbo," Lily said. "Creepy old men think I'm thirty-two years old and it's gross and I hate it!"

"Oh, my God," Brendan said. "Calm down, bimbo."

"Fuck you, Brendan," Lily said. "I'll punch you in the face."

The floor creaked. Brendan screamed.

"Punch me back," she said. "Do it!"

Brendan said, "Go away."

"Come on," Lily said. "Someone punch me in the face."

Rachel said, "Can I slap you?"

When the onions had cooled, I popped them out of their skins, then sautéed the mushrooms, squeaking in bacon grease. Rachel came into the kitchen

holding her phone, with a serene look on her face.

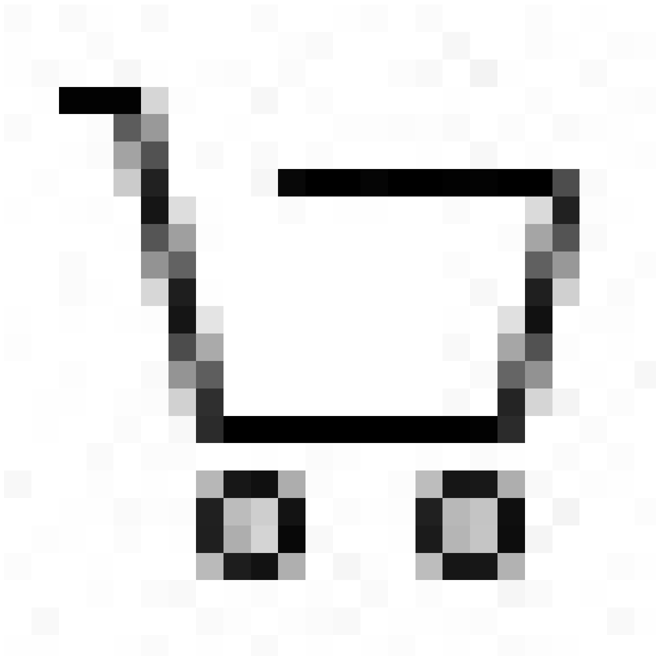


"Don't you think it's more charming with them all arranged by color?"
Cartoon by Paul Noth

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“Can I show you these pants I want?”

“No.”

“Can I have people over tonight?”

“You’re not going to the thing?” She loved the cookie party.

“Perhaps not.”

“Are you eating with us?”

She stepped in front of me. “That looks like what you made last week.” Her phone dinged. “Holy shit, James is calling me!”

“Do not answer!” Lily said. Rachel typed something and sent a snapshot of herself making a weird face.

“What is that?” I said. “Smile the way you always do.”

“The reason I do it this way is because it keeps my jaw straight. If I smile with my mouth open it curves my chin.” I stared at her, dumbstruck. She glared back, defiant.

“Your friends can stay. Please set the table.”

The front door slammed. The dog ran, yelping and shrieking, and Monica fell down on the rug with a crash, as if she’d been shot, and began moaning, making out with the animal. This bestiality went on every night and left her flushed and overheated. She called hello and walked through the house, shoes clomping, and stopped in the living room.

I threw Cognac into the pan and lit it on fire, and it splattered and burned me. I stuck my hand under the faucet, wondering, Why Terry and not me? Why did I get to live? What was I doing?

Monica walked into the kitchen and said, “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?”

“There’s a potluck at the thing. Did you forget?”

I had indeed forgotten. It had been organized. I’d signed up to bring chips.

“Whatever,” she said. “We’ll eat it tomorrow.”

“Can you hear me? Are you listening to something?”

She took the earbuds out of her ears and held them. “No, but I can’t find the case.”

I put the box of kosher salt on the counter. “I like to keep this out, and since you never put away anything except the one thing I’m using, can you leave it alone?”

“Are you about to yell at me?”

“For what?”

“I don’t know. I assumed you were mad.”

“Well, I feel like we’re going to start fighting as soon as I say this.”

“Go ahead.”

“Rachel’s not going over there, and, if she’s not, why am I?”

“It’s the cookie swap.”

“She doesn’t want to go, and I don’t have the energy to be mean to her.”

“Well, that’s good.”

Then she noticed the cookies. I saw then that the second batch had been decorated. The kids had made new colors—Pepto-Bismol pink, pastel blue, tomato red—and turned a broken gingerbread man into Edvard Munch’s “The Scream” and snowmen into what looked like heavily made-up drag queens. They’d given Santas rainbow beards and stoned silver eyeballs, like Jerry Garcia. Monica said, “She’ll be sad when some kid bites the head off one of them,” but we both knew she wouldn’t.

“I was just there,” I said. “You can go over and drop them off.”

Monica looked out at the back of their house. “Did something happen?” she asked. I stared idiotically at the window. “We all feel so much guilt,” she said, trying the therapeutic angle. “He loves you. He trusts you.” I stared at the floor. “We have to go.”

“I don’t have to do anything.”

“Just because he got it doesn’t mean you will.”

If I got a cramp or stubbed my toe, I thought I had it. I didn’t want to imagine it, but then I did: my hands wrenched into grotesque shapes, my eyes red and misty, my skin broken out, my wheelchair cocked at a weird angle, with my feet in the air.

“I’m never getting it. I’m immune.”

I waited for a response, but I’d worn her down with my stupidity.

“We’re going,” she said, and walked out.

I drank a bunch of tequila, loaded the dishwasher, and fed the dog. I felt empty and hollow, and, in my reflection in the window above the sink, I saw that some crucial part of me was missing. Time to go. Somewhere in the house I heard Alvin and the Chipmunks singing "O Holy Night."

•

Ruth and Terry lived in a foursquare from 1910, with a mahogany bannister, ugly brass sconces, a white *Ikea* storage system, and an aquarium big enough to hold an abundance of tears. The neighborhood had decided to meet in person this year, in the relative calm between Delta and Omicron, but as a precaution the doors were open at both ends of the house, and leaves blew around the foyer. In the kitchen, Terry leaned on a cane I'd never seen before, talking with Carmella, the owner of the Christmas Yoda.

Patty the librarian stood over the dining-room table, in a mask and surgical gloves, divvying up cookies in loot bags. Monica gloved up and put on a mask to help her. There were faces from most of the twentysomething houses around this block, including a kid named Charlie who liked to be flung into the deep end of the local pool. This summer I'd flung him, pretended to be a shark who ate him, and played chicken with him sitting on my shoulders and yanking my ears so hard I felt the cartilage tear. Sasha Weinstock said hello on her way out, with her Egyptian eyeliner, her hair dusty red along the tips, smiling and beautiful, her apple cheeks giving away the girl who used to toddle and sing on the sidewalk, who punched through the bottom of our screen door so many times I had to install a metal grate. She'd started college this past fall, after deferring freshman year to spend the lockdown in a plastic booth in front of the library for seven hours a day, telling people how far to stick a Q-tip up their nose. I wished her luck at school.

Ruth came out of the kitchen waving a bottle of rum. She and Terry had volunteered to host the party after he got the diagnosis. I let that sink in. She passed the bottle to Ursula, who poured half of it into a punch bowl, tasted it, shivered, then poured in the rest. Ursula had taught kindergarten for forty years. She spoke in a soft, high voice about a fox den in her garden. Ruth scowled as she sampled the punch, then refilled her cup. It all felt so far away, as if it were some dark memory from a long time ago. Ruth had a

lovely, round moon face, and when she caught me staring I tried to have a conversation with her with just my eyebrows, but it didn't work.

"How are you?" I asked, moving closer. She looked at me as if I were insane. "I mean, what's next on your worry list?"

"I don't even know."

I'd eaten Ruth's parents' corned beef on St. Patrick's Day, and shared a hot tub with her in the Blue Ridge Mountains. She'd been my street crush on and off for all these years. We spent one entire summer watching Thomas the Tank with kids crawling all over us, and once or twice, maybe, I died of lust.

"I feel like a rag doll being dragged around, not doing enough for anybody."

"Ruth."

"I hit a rough spot these past few weeks."

"You're a miracle," I said. "They should study you in a lab."

I saw the redness at the edges of her nostrils, and her soft lips, and to make myself stop staring I looked out the kitchen window and saw Terry on the back deck, in a chair with no arms that made him look unsettled. I took in the people and things around the house, and had a hot, panicky feeling because we were better off than they were in this horrible new way.

•

Back at the house, Rachel opened the door for six boys from Brendan's basketball team, all kind of smelly. The other girls were already upstairs. Kendra brushed her hair with sharp whacks, Maggie lay on the bed feeling queasy, and Lily tried on Rachel's sweaters. Downstairs, the dog hid under the table, and curly-haired James ordered pizzas. Rachel went to the bathroom with Maggie, who'd finagled some gummies for their first try at getting stoned. She'd already eaten one—or two—on her way over, and didn't feel so hot, she felt bizarre actually, as if she were outside her body trying to get back in, and, as Rachel peed, Maggie decided to take a shower.

These were not the kind of gummies you buy in a store with a label of how many milligrams but brown ones from the dealer in the park, with an unregulated distribution of psychoactive chemicals. Rachel helped her in and adjusted the water temperature. The other girls went down and turned on music, and Lily whipped her arms around to stretch the sweater she was wearing, and it turned into dancing. The delivery guy rang the doorbell and Rachel got the pizza, and told the boys to also eat the dinner that had been left on the stove, then checked on Maggie. She found her in the same spot, crying, with soap all over her head, and burst out laughing, and hosed her off.

•

An old professor named Frances came through the front door with a plate of pfeffernüsse, led by her son, who took Seroquel and couldn't hold down a job. Then Scott, the whore-chaser, banged me on the neck and said, "Back from Hollywood?" I'd been home almost two years. Which didn't stop him from leading me through the tragedy of his divorce.

"I always said we were better as parents than as romantic partners."

"That's true," I said, doing my best to make him feel comfortable. He stared at me, wanting to believe that I believed him, but the way he searched my face was so pitiful I felt like weeping.

"I'm seeing someone," he said brightly, and told me about his latest Hinge date.

He was an idiot, but I felt sorry for him. And now he was dating some podiatrist with two grown sons and an apartment in New York.

Then I thought of Mr. Grunst, the most recent departure from our street, who, if he was anywhere at all, might be floating above us, watching this sentimental exercise. Something had spilled on the floor, and I was sort of skating around on it. I picked up the crumbs of smashed crackers. The floor was made up of old pine boards of different widths, with square-cut nail heads, and I thought of how it would go, how boyishly proud Terry would be of each little thing he could do while he could still do it, how Ruth would

become his everything, would do things she couldn't have imagined doing, would hold up his head as she brushed his teeth, and those moments would glint like shiny rainbows in an oily puddle. And at the end she'd kiss him good night, and give him too much morphine, and they'd take away the bed, and we'd all say a few words.

Siena White came in, pulled by her enormous Labradoodle, and went straight into the kitchen where Donna's husband, Kevin, was ladling chili into paper bowls. He gave her tips on how to eat while holding the dog on the leash. She went out back where a fire had been started in the fire pit and some people sat. I followed her out.

The sky was blue-black and also orange and pink from street lights, with tufts of clouds around the moon, and white lights glowed along the fence as the fire tossed up sparks. There were faces lit by firelight, and the heavy smell of wood smoke from burning cedar, from the shingles stacked in Terry's shed which had been used as kindling. It smelled like a Middle Eastern restaurant. A guy named Mark told a long boring story about his gutters, how they clogged, how he cleaned them. I could feel music thumping through my shoes. It was coming from my house.

•

It sounded like what it had become: forty kids from three different high schools, crammed into my basement, by the light of some tinted party bulbs, screaming at the top of their lungs, maybe in an attempt to communicate. Or maybe it sounded as if someone had caught fire and they were beating him with brooms, as if they were people who'd been given some impossible task, who'd been pushed around their whole lives and didn't want to be pushed around anymore but were terrified of being on their own.

Rachel was in the mosh pit when she got shoved and fell and landed on the couch, on top of Andrey, a boy she'd never seen before. It felt nice to land on him, he was sweet, a friend of Omar's, and as they sat there talking she started to have feelings. But then she wondered whether something was actually wrong with him, like, why was he so sweet? As the vodka ran out and kids started to complain, Maggie's mom showed up, a little buzzed herself, in a long red cashmere coat and a clingy sweater dress, and tried to

go downstairs, so Rachel got the basketball team to kick everyone out. Then Katy called from a big party a few blocks away, and told Rachel to get Lily to help mobilize everyone, and Rachel finally found Lily out back behind some ornamental grass with a boy named Miles. They both had leaves and twigs stuck to their clothes.

"You have to leave," Lily said to Miles, before Rachel had said a word. He left.

"How's it going?" Rachel asked, although looking at Lily's face, she knew.

"Not so good," Lily said, and fell into Rachel's arms and sobbed, and Rachel cried, too, because Lily was crying.

On the other side of the fence she could see the cookie-party fire, and now it was too late to go, and she was so sad to miss it.

•

I sat across the fire pit from Kyle, who believed the moon landings were a hoax and the Twin Towers had been blown up with dynamite, and Elliott, an arrogant egomaniac who never looked you in the eye, because he forgot your name. He oversaw a dozen shows on a progressive cable-news channel, and had once coached a soccer team Rachel played on, and got suspended from the league for yelling at a ref who happened to be a ten-year-old boy. Kyle and Elliott chatted amiably with the tall, beautiful woman sitting between them, and I studied her with some relief.

Monica and I were friends, I guess, at long last, but our arrangement had worn me down, stepping around the kitchen while she grew in professional stature. I wanted to go back to being myself but didn't know how. I had nothing to write about and, even worse, nothing to think about. The only hope I had was that Kyle would start talking about voting machines and Elliott would rip him to shreds. We were all in this, still, again, whatever—our street, town, and planet—and we'd never get out of it.

•

Down the block, a neighbor climbed out of bed to watch the chaos of all those kids in front of my house. A girl lying on the sidewalk in a crop top and jeans. A car door closing with too many kids stuffed inside. A graceful lifting of the girl to her feet. Two boys pulling away on a scooter.

Rachel and Kendra put on more clothes as Lily sat in the corner of the bedroom, wearing Rachel's pink sunglasses. When the others looked at her she raised her hand and flashed a tentative peace sign as tears ran down. Rachel wanted to say something like "From now on, unless it's a yes it's a no," but that could wait, because all she could think was Wow, Lily. She knelt and held Lily's hand and rubbed the soft skin of her palm for a while.

"TBH you'll be a great mom," Rachel said, and Lily laughed. Kendra sat on the other side and in a serious whisper said, "No, literally."

"I'm gonna shank you both when you're not looking," Lily said, and wiped some snot.

Katy called, telling them to hurry up, everyone was there, and, as Rachel listened, she watched Lily pick the bag of gummies up off the floor, then ripped it out of her hands and was, like, "No," but Lily was, like, "Hang on," and made a good point: "We paid for these." Rachel wasn't sure what to do. "I'm scared," Kendra said, and Lily opened the bag and was, like, "You can live vicariously through me."

"Should we eat these things?" Rachel asked into the phone, and Katy was, like, "Yeah, go for it," so they did.

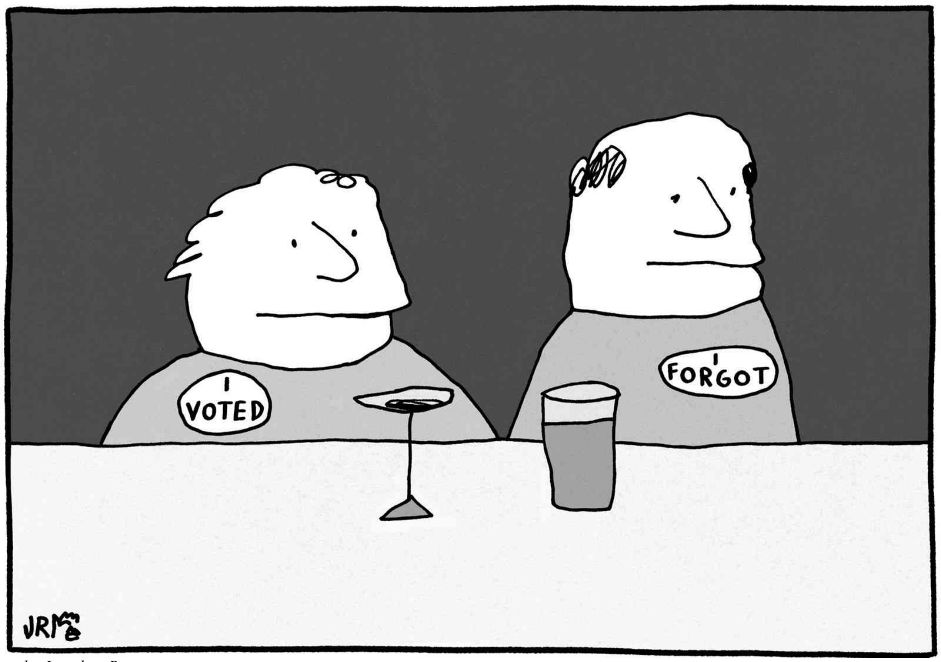
•

I sat beside Kevin, who was Canadian, and somehow shy, long-winded, and boring. Someone's kid slept in a stroller behind us, and Kevin had a plate of lasagna on his lap. He'd heard about Terry and wanted to talk it through.

"It's so sad."

Terry was above us on the deck, and if I sat up straight I could see his face.

“It’s sad,” I said. If I hunched, the railing blocked my view and took away his head. “I’m not sad right now, though.” I kept his head behind the railing. “I can’t feel anything.”

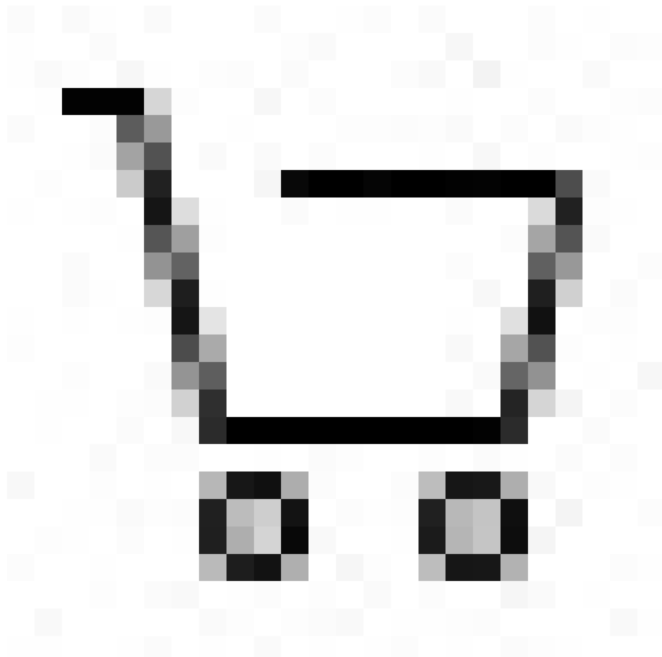


Cartoon by Jonathan Rosen

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Kevin said, “Empathy fatigue.”

“I guess.”

“I grieve that I cannot grieve.”

“What’s that?”

“Emerson.”

“I’ve known people who had it.”

“Oh.”

“There’s nothing we can do.”

•

Walking to the other party, they ran into the boys. The night was clear, and on a dark side street Andrey pointed up and said, “That’s Cassiopeia.”

Rachel said, “That’s Andromeda, dummy. And for that you can thank my fourth-grade science teacher, Mr. Crupp.” But her voice sounded as if it were

burbling out of a shoebox, and she felt strange.

At the corner they saw that the party had been shut down. There was Katy. A million kids on Yuma were trying to figure out their next move. Rachel stumbled off the curb, and, as she tried to wake up to get out of the street before a bad thing happened, she realized that this was not a dream, that she was awake in the middle of a block she'd walked down a thousand times before, now alien and ridiculous, incredibly stoned for the first time in her life. She noticed a white disposable mask dangling from her hand, with lipstick all over the inside. Calm down, she thought. That's my lipstick. She felt bathed in white light, and was in fact lit by headlights as a car cut the distance between them. She felt engine heat, the wind of the speeding hulk. Some essence of her was ripped away like a ghost, while the rest of her lived on, having been held back by hands on either side, and for the next few seconds she felt grateful for the miracle of existence.

•

"It'll go fast," I said. "You'll see." Kevin blinked as if he were trying to see. "First, the foot brace, then the forearm crutches, then the chair and the ramp. The muscles weaken around the lungs, then the lungs clog up and they can't breathe. As people get sicker they make these pronouncements, 'When I need a feeding tube I want to die,' but then they get a feeding tube. Then they get a trach and a vent."

Kevin was trying to eat his lasagna, but it was burnt and hard on top. He sat there sawing at it with a plastic knife, with this annoying little motion, not getting anywhere, and it was agonizing to watch.

"It's like walking through a house and flicking off the lights." I sounded like an expert, dropping knowledge. "He'll be dead in three years."

"You shouldn't say that."

"If he's not dead he'll wish he was."

Kevin's knife broke and he looked at it.

I thought of people on this street, carolling on Christmas Eve.

"At the end it's all about what you can afford, because insurance doesn't cover it."

•

They were running, screaming at the bus driver, and made it in time, climbed onto the bus, and sailed down Wisconsin Avenue, through red lights and over cars. The interior went dark and Rachel looked at Kendra, who nodded as if she knew her thoughts. Rachel leaned into Andrey, in the seat beside her, as if this whole thing were meant to be, and they started making out.

•

I was relieved to see Alan in a crisp striped shirt, dark jeans, black loafers, and a suède jacket, looking smoothly capable and inured to despair, holding a glass full of big ice cubes.

"Jean-Paul," I said. "Did you figure out what 'Nausea' means?"

Alan and Kevin decided that if you forced any group of traumatized, war-bred intellectuals to choose between suicide and meaning, French ones especially, they would invent a philosophy in response to the emergency of modern life: that we are together in this moment and that's all there actually is.

As they talked, some pencil-pushing clerk in the lobby of my brain told me to nod and smile, and peace settled down upon the midnight.

•

They lay on a crypt from the eighteenth century, looking at the stars, and Rachel decided that Andrey was an accidentally good kisser. The cemetery was quiet as she explained that her grandfather had been buried here. Andrey looked so sad. She was kidding. Her grandpa lived in Short Hills.

Some girl started screaming her head off, and they ran over and found a group of drunk kids from a private school. Rachel recognized one of them from gymnastics.

“Well,” the girl said. “I just sat on a dead rat, so that was fun.”

Andrey told Kendra and Lily, “Her grandpa’s buried here.”

Kendra said, “Rachel embellishes.” Andrey didn’t know that word. Rachel wondered if he was too dumb to date. Kendra said, “My dad is coming. I have to go.”

•

I was holding two cups. I handed one to Terry. “Ruth and Ursula made a disgusting punch,” I said.

He raised an eyebrow and sniffed it. “It’s aggressive,” he said. He pretended to be a wine guy, slurping it around in his mouth. “It tastes like someone pissed in a bubble bath.”

“Yes, go on.”

“I’m picking up hints of room freshener.”

We toasted, and it lingered on the tongue, and, when we got sick of that, we sat there looking at the people around the fire, at the firelight playing on the branches of the tree, and talked about which cookies looked the best. I wanted to grab his hand to keep it from shaking. There’d be time for that. Then I wondered where my kid was, and told Monica I was going home to walk the dog, and was aware as I did that I sounded sort of drunk.

•

It was silent, with all the lights on, and I took in the scene: dirty plates, wet socks, empty soda cans, stainless-steel water bottles that reeked of vodka and lemonade. Up in Rachel’s room, I saw black stomper shoes too big for the women in this house, a dirty yellow raincoat, panty hose and lipstick, someone’s hair dryer, sweatpants and a jean jacket. In the kitchen, empty pizza boxes and chicken bones. There was no sign of the dog.

I found her in the basement, crouching, sort of gasping, struggling to breathe. It appeared that she’d eaten a bag of Christmas chocolates; there

were pieces of foil all around her. I'd called poison control over the years about other things—a pound of butter, a tube of toothpaste, eyeglasses, four-hundred-dollar boots—and they'd always said the same thing: "She's part Lab—she can eat anything."

Her gums were speckled black and pink, and as I opened her jaws it seemed as though the bright-pink roof of her mouth had somehow detached in one horrifying piece. There was metal wiring, and I grabbed it and yanked it out, and realized that she'd eaten some kid's retainer. She leaped to her feet, spluttering, shook, and wagged her tail weakly.

I was standing at the front door putting the leash on her when Rachel walked in. She hugged me. Her coat smelled like the cold night, and a brief flash of panic crossed her face. "A bad thing happened to Lily," she said, "but nothing bad happened to me." I wondered what she meant by that, but she went into the kitchen and started banging around. Monica came in then. I went out.

The air was crisp and clear, and my kid was home and the party was over and that was it. I felt happy. It was almost Christmas. We had no plans to go anywhere, nothing complicated to look forward to. This was the best neighborhood in the city, and we had the best street, the best dog, the best family, the best house, with colored lights that made it look like a Mexican restaurant. Terry isn't going to make it, I told myself, but I can stay here forever, I just might, and when I die my spirit will soar above this block, and skim the tops of trees, and look down with love on the people on Earth, and they'll forget me and go on, but I'll be watching. ♦

By Deborah Treisman

By Anthony Lane

By Michael Schulman

Gift List Dept.

- **Missed Out on Black Friday Deals? Try Government Surplus**

Missed Out on Black Friday Deals? Try Government Surplus

Deals, deals, deals! New York's municipalities are selling twenty-five-foot fire hoses, a pair of Nikes given to Mayor Bloomberg as a gift, and a school bus without working brakes.

By Adam Iscoe



'Tis the season. Wreaths have edged out flint corn. Chestnut-praline lattes have replaced pumpkin spice. Fox News took a shot at President Biden for putting up his Christmas tree before Thanksgiving. But, despite RSV and another round of *COVID*, cheer abounds. Mayor Adams even decided to close Fifth Avenue to vehicles for a few Sundays so that people could shop without getting mowed down by an e-bike. Now it's time to spend, even if the economists can't quite make up their mind whether or not it's a good idea. On Black Friday, roughly a hundred and sixty-six million Americans kicked off the shopping season by spending a record-breaking nine billion dollars online. On Cyber Monday, shoppers could find deals on just about everything—a Dyson hair dryer (four hundred and twenty-five dollars, from Sephora), a private flight from Paris to Munich (0.4914 bitcoins), a sixty-five-inch-tall plush unicorn (a thousand dollars, from F. A. O. Schwarz)—

including a bunch of odds and ends that the government was trying to unload. The goods were available on such auction Web sites as PublicSurplus.com and GovDeals.com. (Local pickup only. Payment due within five business days.) For New Yorkers, possible gift items included:

Six orange traffic cones (five dollars for the lot) and several twenty-five-foot fire hoses (also five dollars), which were being discarded by the Hamptonburgh Fire District in Campbell Hall, New York.

Ten thousand square feet of carpet from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority was auctioning off three hundred and seventy-two Uveritech counterfeit-bill detectors; a hundred and twenty-nine Lynde-Ordway coin counters; four fully operable *SEFAC* lifting screw jacks, which are used by subway mechanics to lift subway cars off the subway tracks for maintenance; and one white 1995 Chevy Winnebago with working air conditioner, shower, refrigerator, and microwave (unfortunately, the toilet was removed). Also from the M.T.A.'s treasure chests: lots of vintage tables and chairs—each table bearing pictures of roller coasters, steam locomotives, subway cars, the Brooklyn Bridge, Grand Army Plaza, or Ebbets Field—from New York's Grand Central Terminal.

Elsewhere: nineteen computer monitors. Twenty-three Motorola two-way radios sold with batteries and without power cords. Several tactical headsets. A hat from the early nineties that reads "Racism is an illness. Are you sick?" One vacant lot near a Dollar Tree in Brooklyn (opportunities: endless). Twenty hand-sanitizer dispensers; no hand sanitizer. A thirty-two-inch cathode-ray-tube television (model number CTVG-5463ULCT), which does not have a remote, but does light up. Does it work? Maybe. Maybe not.

In addition: one pair of Nike Air Force 1 sneakers (autographed by Ice-T and Fab 5 Freddy), which were presented to Mayor Bloomberg at a press conference at City Hall ("My crib," the mayor said), and one unworn pair of MVP Magic Johnson sneakers, which were given to Mayor Giuliani before they were boxed up and sent to a Department of Records and Information Services storage facility in Industry City.

Herman Miller desks: six. Office chairs damaged beyond repair: nine. Sequoia *LISST* portable laser-diffraction particle-size analyzer: one.

A Louis Vuitton soccer ball commemorating the 1998 World Cup.

Dozens of cardboard boxes filled with men's and women's white dress shirts, being sold by Metro-North Railroad.

One framed Japanese poster of samurai, given to Mayor Dinkins for an occasion that, according to the seller, has long been forgotten. One beaded and embroidered elephant pillowcase, and one commemorative Arbor Day pen-and-pencil set, also gifts to Mayor Dinkins. One steel drum and one painting depicting a poppy field, given to Mayor Giuliani (context unknown). One Willie Nelson and Wynton Marsalis album, recorded live at Lincoln Center, presented to Mayor Bloomberg. A replica of the first Olympic medal, given to Bloomberg by the Historical and Ethnological Society of Greece.

A 1998 New Holland skid steer (serial number 41586) with a six-foot hybrid boom attachment and a five-foot hydraulic snow-blower attachment. "Seatbelt safety switch can be finicky," the listing said.

A hundred and five concrete cinder blocks and a rusted yellow snowplow blade, sold by a United States Postal Service depot in Chelsea.

One abandoned two-story barge docked in Long Island City. (Not to be confused with the decommissioned Staten Island ferry recently purchased by Pete Davidson and Colin Jost, who renamed it Titanic 2.) One 2009 Mercedes-Benz (warning: no keys). Five MacBook Airs.

One unworn blue "Wegalize Leed" T-shirt given to Mayor Bloomberg. A school bus without seats or working brakes. ("The vehicle can not be used as a school Bus," the government specified.) One decorative silver crown from Neiman Marcus. A vacant lot near Katz's Delicatessen. A vacant lot in Queens.

One drawing of Mayor Ed Koch signed by Mayor Ed Koch. Several light bulbs. A microwave. ♦

By Ben McGrath

By Gabrielle Drolet

By Ali Solomon

By Sofia Warren

Night Life

- **Yo La Tengo’s Hanukkah Shows Return**

Yo La Tengo’s Hanukkah Shows Return

At Bowery Ballroom, the indie trio continues its holiday tradition of featuring unannounced surprise guests.



Some might turn to the Hebrew calendar to learn when Hanukkah falls, but rock-and-roll types need only consult New York’s concert schedule. Since 2001, the holiday’s bounty has included—with few exceptions—an eight-night stand by **Yo La Tengo.** This year, it’s at Bowery Ballroom, Dec. 18-25. Each Hanukkah show features an unannounced surprise opener and comedian—but the event’s star is this blue-chip indie trio, currently gearing up for the release of its sixteenth LP, “This Stupid World.”

By David Remnick

By Ian Crouch

By Anthony Lane

By Andrew Marantz

Off Time

- **Hiroshi Sugimoto Is Right on Time**

By Emma Allen



Have you found yourself confused lately about your age, or about what day of the week it is? Don't fret. According to a U.C. Irvine study, the *COVID*-19 pandemic "altered many Americans' perceptions and experiences of the passage of time . . . blending days and weeks together into endless 'blursdays.' " But for the artist Hiroshi Sugimoto (age seventy-four)—who was back in his vast Chelsea studio the other day (Wednesday) after three years in Japan—the fluidity of perceived time has always been a preoccupation. (See his black-and-white photos of alive-seeming natural-history dioramas, or of wax figurines of Castro and Henry VIII, or of movie screens in theatres from past centuries.)

A guest arriving at Twenty-sixth Street was ferried upstairs by an elevator operator, then led by the smell of incense to a hidden teahouse.

Melissa Chiu, the director of the Hirshhorn Museum, in Washington, D.C., had just arrived. "There are a lot of very interesting adaptations on the traditional teahouse that you've made here," she noted. She wore all black, with one silver earring, one gold.

"It's modified for America," Sugimoto, who wore a white T-shirt, jeans, and boat shoes, said. "This is old American wood, from a torn-down farmhouse.

This water vessel for handwashing is from Japan, a fifteenth-century architectural base stone." Living moss and ferns grew along the wall.

Chiu had commissioned Sugimoto to redesign the Hirshhorn's brutalist sunken sculpture garden. After five years of back-and-forth, the pair was taking one last look at a scale model before the groundbreaking. In 2018, Sugimoto had revamped the Hirshhorn lobby, adding a table made from a seven-hundred-year-old nutmeg-tree root. For the new project, he said, "my first idea was to make some kind of Zen sculpture garden, but that was *too* Zen-like—very simple—so there was no shade."

Sugimoto decided to introduce hand-stacked stone walls, built by master stonemasons using a medieval technique called *ishizumi*. "The walls' pre-modern structure stands out against the modern sculpture," he explained. "There's a time gap between the background and sculpture." The scale model featured miniature works by Henry Moore and Yayoi Kusama.

Additionally, Sugimoto was reopening a path from the garden to the museum's plaza, transforming it into a trumpet-shaped tunnel with reflective steel sides. "People who look at themselves, they look skinnier," he said. "I also try to make the artists' sculptures look as good as possible. Even if a sculpture is not first-class, it can be shown as first-class—I shouldn't say that."

Chiu pulled out a photograph of Gordon Bunshaft, the designer of the museum, in Kyoto at the Zen garden at Ryōan-ji, in the seventies. "Next spring, I'm going to be able to photograph this garden," Sugimoto said. "A photo of a Zen garden is a kind of cliché, a stereotyped image. I am going back to very, very straight photography. I call it stereotype photography—daguerreotype, calotype, Sugimoto's stereotype!"

He led a tour of the studio, pausing by a spindly metal object. "This is my hobby, to modify old clocks, so this is my design, but the mechanism is from the nineteen-thirties. I think it still works." He wound it; it chimed eight.

"It's off time," he said.

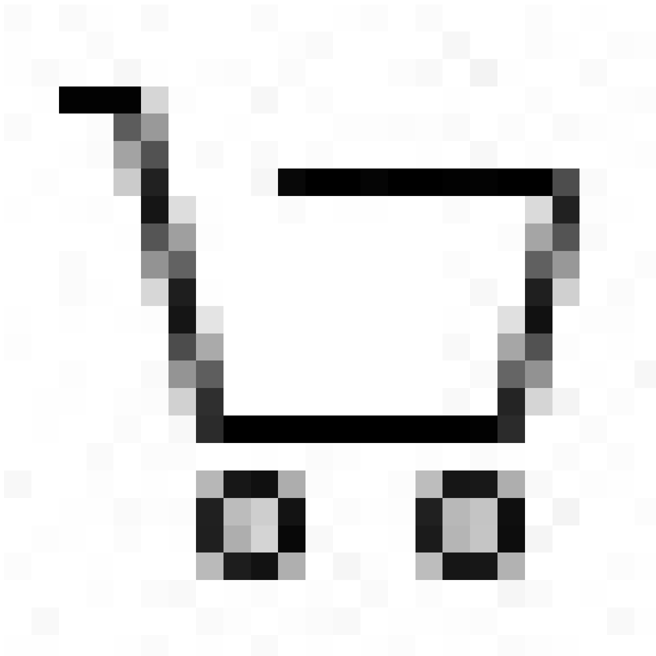


"Same old same old."
Cartoon by Lee Lorenz, May 24, 1999

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Chiu pointed to the rafters, behind which were tucked sheets of rock. “Fossils!” Sugimoto explained. “A few million years old. That’s a starfish and this is a plant, seaweed—I have more!” He led the way to more. “Dinosaur eggs!”

Nearby, studio assistants maneuvered a large device that looked as if it had been designed by da Vinci or Galileo, and attempted to catch sunlight in a prism of optical glass, to project a rainbow on a canvas (which Sugimoto photographed). “I designed this based on the study of Isaac Newton,” Sugimoto explained.

He continued on, through a darkroom, and out onto a balcony.

“Three years ago, none of this was here,” he said, gesturing toward the view. “I used to see the George Washington Bridge in the distance.” He marvelled at a new building with a high glass observation deck which an assistant identified as the Edge. “So, this is the twenty-first-century look,” Sugimoto mused. He turned to gaze at the Empire State Building. “This is the difference of a hundred years.”

“Not that much difference, actually,” Chiu said.

“The solidness is different,” Sugimoto said. “I like the Empire State better. This”—he waved at the Edge—“looks like a cheap construction to me.”

The pair discussed the remaining timeline for the garden project. “The actual construction will be about eighteen months, but the grand opening will be in two years,” Chiu said.

“Two years!” Sugimoto exclaimed. “You have the cash ready?”

“We are in a capital campaign, yes,” Chiu responded.

“You are a professional,” Sugimoto said, smiling. “I don’t worry about it.” ♦

By Louisa Thomas

By John Cassidy

By Danielle Dutton

By Hua Hsu

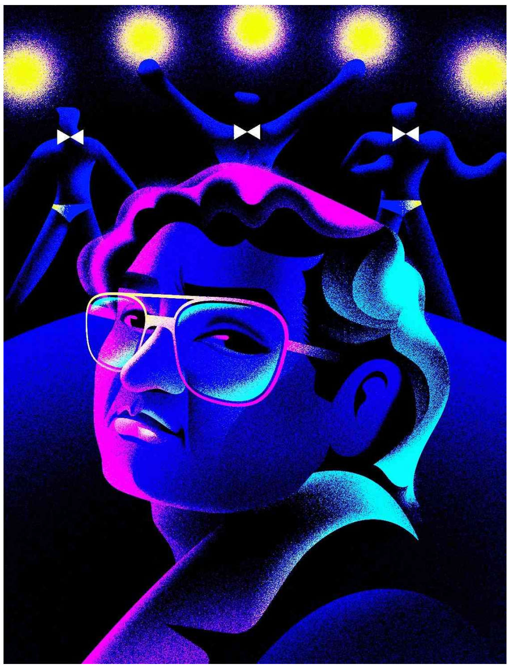
On Television

- **[The American Dream Gets Stripped Bare in “Welcome to Chippendales”]**

The American Dream Gets Stripped Bare in “Welcome to Chippendales”

The Hulu series, starring Kumail Nanjiani and Murray Bartlett, traces the spectacular rise and sordid fall of a cheesy yet pivotal corner of the sexual revolution.

By Inkoo Kang



On the inaugural night of the Chippendales club, the audience’s disbelief at the sight of a half-dozen men dancing and disrobing quickly melts into delight. The financially struggling owner, Somen (Steve) Banerjee (Kumail Nanjiani), has named his Los Angeles establishment for an eighteenth-century cabinetmaker whose rococo designs, Steve claims, adorned the residence of the viceroy of India. The venture may well be the earliest of its kind: a mainstream venue for striptease, by men, for women. The visual appeal of the amateur gyrators, who swan about on a sunken stage in the center of the room, to the Village People’s “Macho Man,” is questionable: they sport muscles and skimpy black underwear, but also mullets and long, greasy curls. Their looks may not matter much anyway; the hooting women are thrilled just to play the part of men for a night. But, for some, a real show needs more than role reversal. “Talk about a flaming pile of trash,” the

choreographer Nick De Noia (Murray Bartlett) says at a later performance, when Steve asks him to leave. (Male patrons are not allowed.) In less than a decade, the two men, working in tandem, turn Steve's frantic experiment into a national sensation, and lock themselves in a rivalry so radioactive it cannot but end in mutual destruction.

Opening in the late nineteen-seventies, Hulu's "Welcome to Chippendales" is a night-club-lit comic tragedy that traces the spectacular rise and sordid fall of a cheesy yet pivotal corner of the sexual revolution. The series' initial pleasures coalesce around the streamlining of the production numbers and the chiselling of its mall-sexy, Ken-doll-on-steroids camp aesthetic. Nick hires dancers who can move in unison—some, like Otis (Quentin Plair), boast professional stage experience. The troupe's costumer, Denise (Juliette Lewis), smooths out the act's kinks by supplying tearaway pants. Dorothy Stratten (Nicola Peltz), a Playmate turned rising actress, whose slimy, controlling husband, Paul Snider (Dan Stevens), talks his way into a small stake in Chippendales, is responsible for what becomes the brand's signature flourish: the stand-alone cuffs and collars, inspired by the bunny uniforms at the Playboy Club. (When bean-counting Steve first meets Dorothy, he's impressed—not by her title or her soft yet staggering beauty but by her acquaintance with Hugh Hefner.) As the business's original mastermind, Steve goads a church group into protesting the club, then calls up a local TV station, garnering his "den of perversion and sin" some free publicity on the evening news.

Those who know Chippendales only from the "Saturday Night Live" sketch or as a popular Las Vegas revue may be surprised to learn of the organization's violent history: in the early nineties, the real-life Banerjee pleaded guilty to racketeering, attempted arson, and murder for hire. It's fitting, however, that the Hollywood version of this story focusses on a briefly magical collaboration that turns toxic over credit-hogging. The showrunners Jenni Konner ("Girls") and Robert Siegel ("Pam & Tommy") nurse ambitions of sociological insight in their reimagining of an Indian immigrant whose American Dream takes the form of a queer white man's channelling of suburban-female desire. And yet the writers are also loath to relinquish the story's twisty, true-crime roots. The result is an ideas-rich but disjointed series that feels like it's tackling too much, yet somehow hardly enough, with a protagonist whose motivations are subject to whatever wild

happenstance the scripts are setting up next. (Why does Steve idolize Hefner? And what does he think of his own improbable role in granting a greater degree of sexual agency to the kinds of women who might not consider men like him—brown, speaking accented English, financially unsteady in a disreputable industry—a viable sexual or romantic partner? "Chippendales" is strangely uninterested in the answers.) As the eight-episode season progresses, and the stripteases become sleeker, the show around them only gets messier.

No one enjoys the club's runaway success for long. Nick, a Sondheim-loving snob with two Emmys that he won't let anyone forget about, is tortured by the artistic challenge of having to top his own themed stagings. (An early favorite: shirtless bellhops thrusting against an ecstatic becardiganed hotel guest on a spinning fourposter bed—a genteel porn scenario that simultaneously emphasizes the woman's allure and class status.) Although many hands went into building Chippendales, Nick knows, as does pretty much everyone else, that it is his genius that sustains it as an attraction. After a coke-fuelled bender, he and Denise decide that the most logical way to level up the stage show is by mounting "Hunkenstein," a horror-tinged rock opera, to be performed by a live band, about the creation of the ultimate beefcake, assembled from the exceptional parts of various men. Steve's angry rejection of the pitch poisons the well of his relationship with his choreographer. Every subsequent no from the boss further convinces Nick that he is "Mr. Chippendales," a meaningless designation that he's happy to trumpet on national television as he turns the production into a franchise and a tour, stoking Steve's rancorous, scheming rage.

The divalicious Nick is the series' only fully realized character, though Lewis and Annaleigh Ashford, who plays Steve's charmingly practical wife, Irene, lend their scenes a lived-in sweetness that their narcissistic male counterparts resist. (Bucking the trend in recent strip-centric entertainment such as "Magic Mike," "Hustlers," "Zola," and "P-Valley," which reframe exotic dance as labor, sometimes under precarious or perilous conditions, the performers here, save one, are little more than a huddle of glistening torsos.) Compared with the supernova that is Nick, who is endowed with every last drop of Bartlett's considerable charisma, Steve is a cold, gray moon. His arc is grander, though, transforming him, à la Walter White, from a striving underdog into a self-pitying sociopath. Nanjiani is serviceable as an actor

from scene to scene, but he can't find his character's core, and receives little help from the writing. The racial microaggressions that Steve regularly endures are flat and obvious, almost P.S.A.-like. His biography is frustratingly spartan; the series only suggests, and barely makes coherent, why he moved to the U.S. and, before Chippendales, sacrificed half a decade of his life to an ascetic existence as a gas-station manager, subsisting on expired sandwiches, despite having enjoyed a comfortable life back in India. It's only when Steve decides to wield America's racial hierarchy against other minorities in pursuit of his own upward mobility—a dramatization of the middle ground between white and Black America that many Asian Americans occupy—that the series periodically achieves the political relevance it fumbles toward.

When Nick signs up Otis, the most talented of the auditioning dancers, Steve hesitates, noting, "He is Black." Then he sees an opportunity in Otis's race: "Customers will love it." Both Steve and Nick turn a blind eye to the way their mostly white clientele single out the token dancer of color for particularly loutish objectification, grabbing Otis's head for a kiss or reaching inside his briefs despite his clear discomfort. ("You don't really get that at Lincoln Center," Nick jokes.) Otis, who admires Steve's achievements as a "brown-skinned brother . . . making shit happen for himself," seeks racial solidarity with his employer, who sees his own hunger reflected back at him in a flattering light. But the entrepreneur, always sniffing around for a shortcut, realizes that the fastest way to climb up is by stepping on others. Steve's misfortune is not that he's wrong but, rather, that he lacks the wealth and the connections to discriminate at scale. America may be where Steve aspired to reinvent himself, but his adoptive home is relentless in making sure he knows his place. ♦

By Saïd Sayrafiezadeh

By Helen Shaw

By Dan Greene

By Robin Coste Lewis

Personal History

- **Jouer Shakespeare pour la caméra de Jean-Luc Godard**
- **Shooting Shakespeare with Jean-Luc Godard**

Jouer Shakespeare pour la caméra de Jean-Luc Godard

L’actrice et autrice se souvient de sa collaboration avec l’enfant terrible du cinéma français.

By Molly Ringwald



Lire en anglais | *Read in English*

Nous étions en 1986, et je venais tout juste de finir mes études secondaires, dans la vraie vie comme dans les films de John Hughes. À l’écran, j’allais en cours dans d’imposantes écoles du Midwest, principalement situées dans la banlieue de Chicago. Dans la réalité, si je n’étais pas en tournage ou occupée à sécher les cours, j’étudiais au Lycée français, une petite institution privée à l’ouest de Los Angeles, dans laquelle j’avais si rarement mis les pieds que lorsque je suis venue de New York afin d’y recevoir mon diplôme de fin d’études, ma mère l’a surnommé mon « baccalauréat honorifique ». À l’époque, j’étais probablement l’une des lycéennes les plus en vue des États-Unis, mais cela faisait déjà un bon moment que je me sentais en décalage avec mon âge. Quand j’ai quitté l’école quelques semaines en avance, pour commencer à tourner *Le Dragueur* avec Robert Downey, Jr., à New York,

j'avais déjà le statut d'actrice professionnelle et une société à mon nom, et pourtant je n'avais pas le droit de commander un verre d'alcool dans un restaurant.

Au cours de ce tournage, mon agente m'a annoncé que le cinéaste franco-suisse Jean-Luc Godard – disparu en septembre dernier à quatre-vingt-onze ans – souhaitait me rencontrer pour le rôle de Cordélia dans une adaptation du *Roi Lear*. À ce moment de ma vie, mes connaissances sur Godard se résumaient à une affiche en vente chez agnès b. Il s'agissait d'un florilège de photographies extraites de ses films les plus emblématiques – *Le Mépris*, *Alphaville*, *Pierrot le Fou*. J'étais attirée par le style de ces images, et en particulier par celle de Jean Seberg avec sa coupe à la garçonne dans *À Bout de souffle*. J'ai acheté l'affiche, mais il me restait encore à découvrir les films qu'elle évoquait.

L'idée de jouer du Shakespeare était intimidante. Je ne m'étais jamais mesurée à l'une de ses œuvres originales, même si le hasard a voulu que mon premier rôle au cinéma ait été dans une autre adaptation moderne d'un classique shakespearien : à treize ans, j'ai joué Miranda, la fille de Prospero (rebaptisé Phillip) qu'incarnait John Cassavetes dans *Tempête* de Paul Mazursky. Mon agente m'a demandé de prendre *King Lear* en considération : Godard était un réalisateur important, quoi qu'ésotérique, et elle savait que je brûlais d'envie de m'engager dans un projet moins grand public. J'avais beau adorer travailler avec Hughes, je ne voulais pas être cantonnée à une image de jeune star pour adolescents, et je ne m'étais jamais sentie vraiment à l'aise avec ce rôle de porte-parole d'une génération dans lequel j'avais été propulsée alors que j'en étais encore à préparer mon examen d'algèbre.

Elle m'a dit que Norman Mailer serait aussi de la partie (même si elle ignorait au juste la forme que prendrait sa contribution), et m'a encouragée à au moins accepter le rendez-vous. Pour m'y préparer, j'ai fait un saut à la librairie The Strand pour acheter *Le Roi Lear* en version poche, puis dans un vidéoclub où j'ai loué *À Bout de souffle* que j'ai aussitôt regardé, fascinée par Jean Seberg et son partenaire à l'écran, Jean-Paul Belmondo.

Un jour où je ne tournais pas, j'ai pris un taxi seule pour aller rencontrer Godard et le producteur Tom Luddy, dans une suite du Sherry Netherland, un hôtel de luxe situé face à Central Park. Luddy m'a accueillie à la porte et

m'a conduite dans le salon, où nous avons échangé des banalités – si banales que mon esprit n'en a conservé aucun souvenir. Le cinéaste a fait son apparition au bout de deux ou trois minutes, et à partir de cet instant mon attention a été accaparée par son imposante présence. Godard arpentait la pièce de long en large en me scrutant derrière les verres épais et teintés de ses lunettes. Ses cheveux bouclés, hirsutes, s'ébattaient indociles sur les côtés, et il était presque entièrement chauve sur le sommet du crâne. Il me semblait vieux à l'époque, et je suis sidérée de songer qu'il était à peine plus âgé que je ne le suis aujourd'hui. Je me suis poliment enquise de l'existence d'un scénario que je pourrais lire. Tirant des bouffées de son gros cigare qui imprégnait la suite d'une odeur âcre, il a fait non de la tête, mais il a dit qu'il allait m'expliquer son idée. Pendant une quarantaine de minutes, il a alors exposé les grandes lignes de son projet, sa fameuse voix monocorde empreinte d'un fort accent français. J'ai fait de mon mieux pour suivre le cheminement de sa pensée et comprendre son interprétation de la pièce (ce qu'il appelait « une approche »). Il ne s'est jamais assis, mais il cessait de temps à autre de faire les cents pas pour rallumer son cigare. Tom Luddy me lançait des regards nerveux pendant que j'écoutais. De cet exposé, j'ai retenu que Godard voulait faire de Lear un mafieux américain nommé Don Learo – il prononçait « lé-a-ro » – ce qui impliquait que sa fille Cordélia soit également américaine. Lorsqu'il s'est tu, je n'ai posé que deux questions. La première était : Pourquoi me voulait-il pour ce rôle ? Il a souri comme s'il s'y attendait et a répondu qu'en tant que jeune star du cinéma, je représentais ce qu'il y avait de plus proche d'une princesse aux États-Unis. Je soupçonnais une raison plus pratique : le succès des films de John Hughes avait fait de moi le genre d'actrice à même d'assurer le financement d'un film.

L'autre question concernait le lieu du tournage. Sa réponse : La Suisse ou Malibu, selon l'acteur qui incarnerait Lear. Il en restait deux sur sa liste : Rod Steiger et Burgess Meredith. Steiger, qui avait reçu un Oscar pour *Dans la chaleur de la nuit* en 1968, l'année de ma naissance, n'accepterait que si ses scènes étaient filmées à proximité de son domicile de Malibu. Meredith – un acteur que je connaissais surtout à travers des rediffusions de *Batman*, la série télévisée des années 1960 dans laquelle il jouait le Pingouin, mais dont la riche carrière avait commencé au théâtre en 1929 – était prêt à faire le voyage. S'il rejoignait la distribution de *King Lear*, le tournage se ferait en Suisse, le pays où vivait Godard et où, me semble-t-il, il préférait alors

travailler. Je ne savais pas trop ce qui s'était passé avec Mailer. Je devais me rendre disponible pendant deux semaines, ce qui était bien plus court que les mois de tournage auxquels j'étais habituée. Ce projet était juste assez étrange pour piquer ma curiosité.

À dire vrai, je trouvais l'aspect français de cette aventure assez irrésistible. Depuis mon enfance dans la banlieue de Sacramento où je regardais l'émission de télévision « The French Chef » de la cuisinière Julia Child avec ma mère, je considérais la France comme l'incarnation même de la culture. Lorsque ma famille s'est installée à Los Angeles, j'ai choisi le Lycée français parce qu'Irène Brafstein, ma préceptrice bien-aimée sur les tournages, avait donné des cours particuliers à Jodie Foster avant moi, et que Jodie (que j'admirais) avait fréquenté cette école dont elle était sortie pourvue d'un enviable bilinguisme. Toutefois, intégrer un établissement francophone en seconde m'a donné le sentiment de passer mon temps à essayer de rattraper le niveau des autres élèves. Pas découragée pour autant, je me suis inscrite avec une camarade de classe dans une colonie de vacances, à Hyères dans le sud de la France, l'été qui a suivi le tournage du *Breakfast Club*. J'étais désormais une francophile accomplie qui dévorait aussi bien les livres de Colette et de Simone de Beauvoir que ceux de Fitzgerald et Hemingway, lesquels s'étaient tous deux construits une vie à l'étranger ; une vie d'expatriés teintée d'une douce langueur à laquelle j'espérais un jour pouvoir goûter. Lors d'une scène du *Breakfast Club*, j'avais même improvisé une réplique (conservée par John Hughes dans la version finale) où Claire, mon personnage, rêve à haute voix de l'endroit où elle aimerait se trouver – en France. Il semblait écrit que je devais un jour collaborer avec l'un des réalisateurs les plus respectés du cinéma français, et j'ai donc accepté sa proposition.

On m'avait dit que Woody Allen, dont la réputation de cinéaste était alors à son zénith, interprétait le bouffon du roi dans *King Lear*. Accompagnée de Brian Hamill, le photographe de plateau du *Dragueur* qui travaillait régulièrement avec Allen, je me suis rendue au Michael's Pub où le réalisateur de *Manhattan* jouait de la clarinette avec une formation de jazz presque tous les lundis soir. Après que Brian a fait les présentations, j'ai dit à Woody Allen que j'avais accepté le film de Godard, avant de lui demander comment ça s'était passé pour lui, dans la mesure où il avait déjà tourné ses scènes. Allen s'est décrit contraint de citer du Shakespeare, couvert de bouts

de pellicule, avec le sentiment d'être… eh bien, un bouffon, même si son personnage était appelé le Monteur. J'espère que ça se passera mieux pour vous, m'a-t-il dit. Ce n'était pas encourageant.

J'ai passé l'automne à assurer la création du rôle-titre d'une pièce d'Horton Foot, *Lily Dale*, dans un théâtre « off Broadway », avant de retourner à Los Angeles pour passer les fêtes de Noël en famille. J'ai reçu de nombreux télégrammes, ainsi qu'un plan du scénario agrémenté de dessins de la main de Godard, qui semblait sincèrement aux anges que j'ai accepté de jouer dans son film. Avant l'ère de l'Internet, un télégramme était le moyen le plus rapide d'envoyer un message sans décrocher le téléphone. Alors que les années 1980 touchaient à leur fin, les télégrammes semblaient déjà surannés, et je trouvais quelque chose de glamour à cette évocation d'une époque révolue. Je crois que personne ne m'en avait envoyé avant lui.

Au mois de mars, j'ai décollé de J.F.K. à bord du Concorde en compagnie de Tom Luddy et Burgess Meredith, qui avait finalement obtenu le rôle de Lear. Nous volions vers Paris, avec la Suisse pour destination finale. C'était seulement la deuxième fois que j'allais tourner sans la présence d'un de mes parents sur le plateau, et mon contrat stipulait que les producteurs devaient réserver un vol entre Los Angeles et la Suisse à une de mes amies, afin que je ne sois pas seule. Avec son nez pointu et son fuselage effilé, le Concorde était aussi chic qu'un modèle d'Irving Penn.



Molly Ringwald et Angie Campolla-Sanders, photographiées au Château de Nyon, Suisse, en 1987.Photographie de Julie Delpy / Courtesy Angie Campolla-Sanders

Nous venions d’atterrir à Paris un peu moins de trois heures et demie plus tard, lorsque, paniquée, je me suis rendu compte que j’avais mystérieusement perdu mon passeport. Le fait que j’ai pu en obtenir un nouveau presque sur-le-champ témoigne du prestige dont Godard bénéficiait en France. Ce n’est qu’avec un court retard que nous avons pris un autre vol pour l’aéroport de Genève, depuis lequel une voiture nous a conduits jusqu’à Nyon et l’hôtel Beau-Rivage, où les acteurs devaient à la fois être hébergés et filmés.

À ce stade, j’avais une certaine idée du scénario, qui semblait avoir été modifié depuis mon premier rendez-vous avec Godard, et même depuis le plan qu’il m’avait envoyé à Los Angeles. Dans les grandes lignes, l’intrigue était la suivante : dans un monde détruit par la catastrophe atomique de Tchernobyl, un petit homme espiègle nommé William Shakespeare Jr. V est chargé de recréer l’œuvre de son fameux ancêtre. Le metteur en scène d’opéra avant-gardiste Peter Sellars jouait le descendant de Shakespeare, et Godard lui-même s’était ménagé un rôle qui n’apparaît dans aucune pièce de Shakespeare : Herr Doktor Pluggy, un inventeur avec des câbles vidéo qui lui pendent de la tête, en quête de quelque chose appelé « l’image ».

Le premier jour de tournage, j’ai demandé à un membre de la production quand j’étais censée rencontrer les maquilleur, coiffeur et autre costumier, et

on m’a répondu que je devais m’occuper seule de mon apparence à l’écran. On m’a toutefois informée que Godard viendrait me rendre visite dans ma chambre pour choisir les vêtements de Cordélia parmi ceux que j’avais emportés en Suisse. C’était du jamais-vu pour moi, et j’ai regretté de ne pas avoir été plus sélective au moment de faire ma valise. De retour dans ma chambre, j’ai choisi un joli pull et une jupe assortie, puis j’ai noué un foulard dans mes cheveux avant de me maquiller avec soin. Après quoi, j’ai écrit des cartes postales en attendant la venue de Godard, le contenu de ma valise consciencieusement disposé sur le lit. Aussitôt arrivé, flanqué d’un assistant, il m’a dévisagée et s’est exclamé en anglais : « Non, non, non ! Trop de maquillage ! Retirez tout ça. Juste un peu de mascara si vous ne pouvez pas faire autrement, c’est tout. » *That’s all.* Il avait prononcé le « a » de « all » comme un « o », articulé exactement de la même façon qu’il m’a plus tard demandé de prononcer la réponse de Cordélia à son père, qui l'interrogeait sur ce qu’elle dirait pour lui prouver son amour filial. « Pas nothing », « NO THING ». Il a séparé le mot en deux et, sans vraiment comprendre pourquoi, j’ai senti que la distinction était importante.

J’étais impatiente de rencontrer les autres acteurs du film, même si je n’avais pas été particulièrement ravie d’apprendre que Peter Sellars était des nôtres. Deux ans plus tôt, on m’avait laissé croire qu’il me confierait le rôle de Nina dans sa version de *La Mouette*, avec Colleen Dewhurst au Kennedy Center de Washington, avant de m’informer à la dernière minute que Nina serait finalement interprétée par Kelly McGillis. Cela m’avait semblé injuste à l’époque, dans la mesure où Nina était une adolescente comme moi. J’avais toujours une dent contre lui, et lorsque le tournage a commencé, je dois avouer avoir pris un malin plaisir à observer le dédain avec lequel Godard le traitait, alors que manifestement, Sellars l’idolâtrait.

Je savais désormais que Norman Mailer avait été le premier choix de Godard pour jouer Lear, mais j’ignorais toujours les détails du différend qui l’avait poussé à quitter le projet. Du côté des autres acteurs et de l’équipe technique, j’ai entendu dire que l’écrivain et sa fille, qui devait jouer Cordélia, avaient séjourné dans ce même hôtel – et tourné dans cette même chambre où Burgess et moi tournions à présent – mais qu’au bout de deux ou trois jours Mailer avait fichu le camp à la suite d’une dispute avec le réalisateur, entraînant sa fille avec lui. Cela me semblait étrange et intriguant, et Godard continuait à ronchonner à ce sujet.

L'actrice Julie Delpy jouait Virginia (Woolf) dans le film et le réalisateur Leos Carax s'était vu attribuer le rôle d'Edgar (pas le fils aîné de Lear, comme on aurait pu le penser, mais plutôt Edgar Allan Poe). Julie était ma cadette d'une année, mais elle en savait bien plus long que moi sur Godard. Elle avait déjà eu un petit rôle dans *Détective*, un film sorti en 1985 qui avait été sa première apparition au cinéma. « C'est un génie », m'a-t-elle assuré d'un ton solennel. Quand je ne tournais pas, j'allais découvrir la ville avec elle et mon amie Angie. Julie parlait alors un anglais approximatif et mon français n'étant guère meilleur, nous nous apprenions nos langues respectives tandis qu'elle lançait inexplicablement des claque-doigts au pied de malheureux inconnus, hurlant de rire face aux réactions effrayées de ses cibles. J'ignore où elle s'était procuré ces petits pétards, mais je ne serais pas étonnée que Godard ait été son fournisseur.

Un jour, Godard s'est faufilé dans la chambre de Burgess pour faire son lit en portefeuille. J'ai remarqué que le cinéaste semblait prendre plaisir à provoquer les gens, mais heureusement pour moi ses canulars visaient généralement les hommes.

Il y avait chez Burgess un raffinement naturel et sans prétention que j'admirais. Contrairement à moi, il s'était frotté à nombre d'artistes avant-gardistes. Il avait fait ses débuts à Broadway en 1930 dans le *Roméo et Juliette* d'Eva Le Gallienne, et au fil du temps il avait travaillé avec à peu près tout le monde – Kurt Weill, John Steinbeck, James Baldwin, Otto Preminger, Jean Renoir. Malgré sa longue expérience, il trouvait déconcertant de travailler les répliques que Godard lui donnait la veille au soir et de découvrir le lendemain en arrivant sur le plateau qu'elles n'étaient plus d'actualité. Burgess n'avait rien contre le travail expérimental ; il voulait simplement être inclus dans le processus. Les acteurs peuvent se sentir infantilisés par ce genre de petits jeux, et c'est seulement grâce à sa bonne nature qu'il n'a pas claqué la porte comme l'avait fait Mailer.

Lors de nos dîners à l'hôtel, dans l'élégant restaurant avec vue sur le lac Léman, Burgess et moi spéculions sur ce que manigançait notre impénétrable réalisateur. Grand amateur de vin, Burgess commandait les meilleures bouteilles de la carte – un château Petrus 1982, par exemple – ce qui impressionnait grandement le personnel. Mon amie Angie se joignait souvent à nous, et parfois Julie. Sellars (à qui j'avais fini par pardonner) est

aussi venu s'asseoir une ou deux fois à notre table. Burgess coiffait sa crinière blanche d'une variété d'élégantes casquettes et nous régalait d'histoires sur sa vie. Son regard bleu clair était aiguisé, et il y avait dans ses yeux un pétillement que j'avais, enfant, imaginé dans ceux du Père Noël. À cette époque, il envisageait d'écrire ses mémoires ; une autobiographie déguisée en livre sur les vins qu'ils avaient aimé au cours d'une vie de dégustation. Mon anecdote préférée était celle avec Tallulah Bankhead, lorsque la grande actrice délurée l'avait convoqué dans sa suite du Gotham Hotel, à Manhattan. « C'est là qu'on sait qu'on a réussi sa vie ! » nous a-t-il dit avec un sourire malicieux. Il avait enfilé son plus beau costume pour ce qu'il pensait être un tête-à-tête avec Bankhead. Elle lui a ouvert la porte entièrement nue, un verre de champagne à la main et une bacchanale battant son plein derrière elle. « Burgess, *dahling* ! » s'est exclamée l'actrice. Une chose en entraînant une autre, il a fini par se retrouver avec elle dans une des chambres, son beau costume en boule au pied du lit.

« Et voilà que juste avant la petite mort, elle murmure dans mon oreille : "Ne jouis pas en moi, Burgess *dahling*, je suis fiancée à Jock Whitney !" », nous a-t-il raconté. « Et le champagne qu'elle buvait était… » Franchement, ses histoires faisaient passer le Brat Pack pour une réunion d'Amish.

Godard n'est jamais venu dîner avec nous. Quel dommage qu'il se soit isolé de tous : quand on sait à quel point il adorait le cinéma et l'âge d'or d'Hollywood, j'ai le sentiment qu'il se serait délecté des anecdotes de Burgess. Avec le recul, il me semble qu'en réalité il était un peu timide, dans son monde. Pour lui, la seule façon de comprendre ce qui l'entourait était peut-être de faire tourner sa caméra et de monter ce qu'il avait filmé.

Un jour, alors que nous étions à environ la moitié du tournage, Burgess m'a expliqué qu'il y avait du sang factice sur les draps de la chambre qui servait de décor, et il m'a demandé si j'en savais plus que lui. Ce n'était pas le cas.

« Qu'est-ce qu'il nous mijote, encore ? » a dit Burgess d'un ton pensif. J'imaginais qu'il s'agissait d'une des blagues dont le cinéaste était coutumier ; un canular destiné à jouer avec les nerfs de Burgess, à le déstabiliser – à faire de lui ce vieil homme désorienté, au caractère tempétueux , qui correspondait au Lear que Godard avait en tête. Pourtant, des années plus tard, j'ai découvert dans *Jean-Luc Godard, tout est cinéma*,

le livre publié en 2008 par le critique Richard Brody, que le sang était destiné à symboliser la virginité de Cordélia. L'analyse de Brody confirmait ce que j'avais entendu de la bouche de Mailer une décennie plus tôt : Godard voulait explorer la piste d'une relation sexuelle entre Lear et sa fille. C'est un angle qui ne m'avait jamais traversé l'esprit lors du tournage, mais j'ai compris plus tard que c'était la raison pour laquelle Mailer avait quitté le projet (sans compter que Godard avait mis son scénario à la poubelle).

En 1998, j'étais tombée sur Norman Mailer lors d'une soirée. À peine avais-je mentionné le film de Godard que ses yeux avaient semblé lui sortir de la tête et qu'il m'avait agrippé le bras, me conduisant dans le calme d'un vestibule afin de me donner sa version des faits, laquelle était en gros que Godard était un monstre. Ce soir-là, Mailer m'a dit qu'il avait été offensé que Godard ait souhaité traiter son *King Lear* sous l'angle de l'inceste, non seulement parce que le cinéaste avait choisi Mailer et sa fille Kate pour ces rôles, mais aussi parce qu'il avait décidé d'utiliser leurs véritables noms dans le film. De son côté, Godard avait été furieux de perdre son Lear, et il n'était pas mieux disposé à l'égard de Mailer au moment de monter son film, décidant de placer la plupart des plans qu'il avait pu tourner avec Mailer père et fille dans le générique de début, accompagnés d'une voix off qui désigne Norman d'un sarcastique « le Grand Écrivain ». Dix ans plus tard, Norman Mailer était toujours outré, et il m'a semblé que relater l'impudence de Godard lui procurait autant de douleur que de volupté.

Godard n'a pas tenté d'utiliser le vrai nom de Burgess ou le mien dans son film, comme il l'avait fait avec Norman et Kate. Il devait se douter qu'il rencontrerait la même résistance. De toute façon, Burgess n'était pas mon véritable père. Nous étions suffisamment mûrs l'un comme l'autre pour jouer avec cette lecture en tête – ce n'est pas comme s'il nous demandait de tourner une scène d'amour – mais de toute évidence, il ne voulait pas prendre le risque. Peut-être savourait-il le côté clandestin de sa démarche, le sentiment d'impunité.

Tous les vêtements de Cordélia sont en effet ceux que j'ai emportés avec moi, à l'exception d'une lourde chemise de nuit blanche en lin épais que je porte dans la scène où mon personnage expire. Spoiler : Cordélia meurt aussi dans la version de Godard, mais il n'y a pas grand-chose d'autre qui corresponde au texte original. En dehors de quelques phrases du *Roi Lear*

que prononce mon personnage, la plupart des extraits de Shakespeare qu'il m'a été demandé de lire étaient soient tirés d'un sonnet (*Sonnet 47*, que j'ai lu dans un micro perche, juchée sur le rebord d'une baignoire) ou, si ma mémoire est bonne, d'un dialogue de Jeanne d'Arc dans *La première partie de Henri VI*. La narration chuchotée de Godard, qui se superpose à la bande son, donne le sentiment d'entendre des voix, comme Jeanne d'Arc, même si je ne suis pas certaine que cela ait été intentionnel.

Pendant le tournage, il m'arrivait de poser des questions à Godard, telles que : « Pourquoi l'équipe est-elle aussi réduite ? » Je n'avais jamais vu aussi peu de monde sur un plateau. Régler l'éclairage consistait simplement à déplacer une lampe de table d'un endroit à un autre « Ce n'est pas nécessaire, tous ces gens. Ces grosses équipes de tournage, c'est ridicule… », répondait-il avec dédain. « On n'a pas besoin d'être si nombreux pour faire un film ». Il y a peut-être du vrai dans ce point de vue, mais il se peut aussi qu'en 1987, Godard n'ait pas été en mesure de réunir sur son nom le genre de budget qui lui aurait permis de s'adjoindre les services d'une grosse équipe, même s'il l'avait souhaité. Et puis le cinéaste était avant tout un introverti qui se sentait mieux en petit comité. Les équipes restreintes sont plus faciles à contrôler, et pour travailler avec lui, il fallait se soumettre entièrement à sa vision des choses. Cela ne pouvait pas être plus différent de ce que j'avais vécu avec d'autres réalisateurs, et en particulier John Hughes, avec qui le travail d'acteur était aussi une collaboration.

Quand je regarde *King Lear* aujourd'hui, je suis frappée de voir à quel point je semble immobile et en alerte. Mon dos est bien droit, et par moments on pourrait presque croire qu'il s'agit d'une photographie – jusqu'à ce que je me mette à parler ou à bouger. Godard avait des exigences quant au moindre de mes gestes, et je trouvais plus simple de faire exactement ce qu'il souhaitait. Un jour, avant une scène où Cordélia devait se réveiller dans un lit, je lui ai demandé s'il voulait que je me réveille lentement. Il m'a regardé comme si ma question était absurde : « Non, vous vous réveillez, c'est tout. Ne jouez pas. » Il a un peu développé, m'expliquant que dans les films américains, les acteurs passaient leur temps à jouer la comédie, ce qui pour lui était un péché cardinal.

Je regrette aujourd'hui de ne pas avoir discuté davantage avec Godard, mais je dois avouer que ma propre timidité m'en a empêché. Il m'impressionnait.

Pour moi, les français étaient des figures d'autorité – ils étaient mes professeurs au lycée.

Vers la fin du tournage, Godard m'a dit qu'il jugeait mon travail entièrement authentique, à une exception près. Bien sûr, ces mots ont capté toute mon attention, et je lui ai demandé de me dire quel était ce moment qui manquait d'authenticité.

« Je vous le dirai quand ce sera terminé », m'a-t-il répondu.

Je n'ai pas oublié. Une fois ma dernière scène tournée, je suis allée le voir pour l'interroger sur ce fameux moment, et il m'a dit qu'il s'agissait de la scène où Cordélia gît, morte, aux côtés de son père. Cela n'avait ni queue ni tête, dans la mesure où il s'agissait de ma toute dernière scène – elle n'avait même pas été tournée au moment où il m'avait fait cette remarque. Après tout, être une femme ne me préservait peut-être pas entièrement de ses diableries.

Le tournage terminé, Burgess, mon amie Angie et moi sommes retournés aux États-Unis. Burgess nous a cornaqués à travers l'aéroport, aboyant des ordres en prenant la voix du Pingouin.

À vingt-quatre ans, j'ai tenu la promesse que je m'étais faite plus jeune, et je me suis installée à Paris. Quand j'ai dit à mon compagnon français que j'avais joué dans un film de Godard, il en est resté bouche bée. En 1995, faire une recherche sur l'IMDb ne se faisait pas trop, et *King Lear* avait fini par prendre des allures de mythe en France, où il n'avait jamais été distribué. J'ignore s'il s'agit d'une légende urbaine, mais on raconte que des tomates ont été lancées sur l'écran lorsque le film a été présenté à Cannes. Je n'ai pas été conviée à cette première. Je suis allée voir le film avec deux amis dans une salle de cinéma presque entièrement vide, à Los Angeles, où *King Lear* est resté très peu de temps à l'affiche. J'ai trouvé ça aussi déroutant à regarder que ça l'avait été à tourner. Voir le film achevé n'a rien clarifié pour moi – aujourd'hui encore, le fait qu'en 2012 Richard Brody l'ait placé en tête de sa liste des « Dix meilleurs films de tous les temps » me laisse perplexe. Dans ce cinéma à Los Angeles, j'ai été surprise de voir que Godard avait conservé les scènes avec les Mailer, et je n'ai pu que rire devant un tel culot.

Lorsque je vivais à Paris, les gens que je rencontrais dans le milieu du cinéma se sentaient tenus de choisir leur camp ; pour ou contre la Nouvelle Vague, et en particulier pour ou contre Godard. La nouvelle génération de réalisateurs était résolument anti-intellectuelle. « Oh, c'est un raseur », m'a dit un célèbre acteur de comédies. « Il représente tout ce qui ne va pas dans le cinéma français. Cette façon de toujours se regarder le nombril ».

Pour ma part, Godard continuait à occuper mes pensées. Il était comme un puzzle que je ne parvenais pas à compléter, mais dont je ne pouvais me résoudre à ranger les morceaux dans la boîte. Mon amie Victoria Leacock – fille du pionnier du cinéma direct, Richard Leacock – et moi avons eu l'idée de filmer un entretien avec lui sous forme de court métrage, que nous voulions intituler *En attendant Godard*. Nous sommes convenues que Victoria me filmerait à bord du train entre Paris et la Suisse, trajet au cours duquel j'évoquerais le tournage de *King Lear*. Une fois en Suisse, je devais me rendre chez Godard et lui demander des explications : « Mais enfin, Monsieur Godard, de quoi parle votre film ? ». Nous nous sommes dit que le « En attendant » de notre titre inspiré de Beckett nous permettrait de réaliser ce film, que Godard accepte ou non de m'accorder un entretien devant la caméra. « Intitule-le *En train de filmer* », m'a dit mon compagnon français. « Crois-moi, ce jeu de mots va lui plaire ». Le père de Victoria avait fondé une société de production avec le documentariste D.A. Pennebaker, laquelle a frôlé la faillite en 1969, après que Godard leur avait fait faux bond sur un projet dans lequel ils s'étaient déjà beaucoup investis. Son père lui avait toujours dit que ce contretemps avait précipité la fin de Leacok-Pennebaker. Nous avions toutes les deux des explications à demander.

J'ai tenté ma chance et, utilisant le titre français que mon compagnon m'avait suggéré, j'ai envoyé une lettre au bureau de Godard à Rolle, en Suisse, comme on lance une bouteille à la mer. Peu de temps après, mon compagnon et moi avons été réveillés au milieu de la nuit par cette voix si particulière, traînante et monocorde, qui acceptait le projet.

À l'automne 1995, Godard m'a donné rendez-vous à Paris, dans un restaurant à deux pas des Champs-Élysées. Je lui ai apporté un cigare qu'il a fait disparaître avec un sourire dans la poche poitrine de sa veste en tweed, comme s'il s'attendait à cette offrande. Je ne l'ai pas trouvé changé depuis la dernière fois que je l'avais vu. C'était le même homme que dans mon

souvenir, quoi qu'un peu plus petit, un peu moins imposant. J'ai été choquée de le voir verser de l'eau dans son vin avant de le boire, mais je me suis abstenue de tout commentaire. Nous avons parlé de films sortis récemment. Il n'était guère emballé par *Pulp Fiction*, le film du moment. « Pas authentique », a-t-il déclaré (encore ce mot !). En revanche, il avait aimé comme moi *Trente-deux films brefs sur Glenn Gould* du réalisateur québécois François Girard. Cette fois-ci, notre conversation se faisait entièrement en français, ce qui était encore compliqué pour moi, et j'hésitais péniblement entre le vous et le tu. Il n'a rien fait pour me mettre à l'aise, semblant au contraire se délecter de mon embarras. Pas de quoi s'étonner, quand on songe que la question du tutoiement l'intéressait suffisamment pour qu'il la glisse dans les dialogues d'au moins un de ses films. Dans *Bande à part*, sorti en 1964, Arthur (Claude Brasseur) demande à Franz (Sami Frey), à propos d'Odile (jouée par Anna Karina, épouse et muse de Godard), une femme qu'ils convoitent tous les deux : « Avec Odile, vous vous tutoyez ?»

» Quand Franz répond par la négative, Arthur fanfaronne : « Je me l'enverrai quand ça me dira.»

». Les mots comptaient pour Godard – en fait, c'était une obsession chez lui. Les jeunes générations prennent de plus en plus de libertés avec le bon usage de leur langue, mais Jean-Luc Godard ne voulait pas céder un pouce sur ce terrain. Il était le plus formel des formalistes qu'il m'ait été donné de rencontrer.

La surprise est venue d'un moment de vulnérabilité, quelques secondes saisissantes au cours desquelles il m'a confié avoir été « ému » par ma lettre, avant d'expliquer que les autres actrices – les actrices américaines, entendait-il, citant Jean Seberg et Jane Fonda – avaient toutes coupé les ponts avec lui. J'ai noté dans un coin de ma tête de revenir sur la question devant la caméra de Victoria, mais j'ai alors dû repartir aux États-Unis pour tourner un film, et le nôtre a été mis entre parenthèses. Je m'efforce de ne pas avoir trop de regrets, mais ne pas avoir mené à bien ce projet en est un.

Ce jour-là, après avoir quitté le restaurant au terme de notre déjeuner, nous avons marché ensemble sur les Champs-Élysées. Le ciel d'automne s'assombrissait déjà et les lumières des vitrines commençaient tout juste à

briller dans le jour déclinant. Il m’a demandé où je vivais, et je lui ai répondu que mon appartement se trouvait à la limite du Marais, juste en face du Cirque d’hiver.

« Près du Père Lachaise », a-t-il dit.

« Oui », ai-je répondu. « Pas trop loin ».

Nous avons flâné un moment, comme Belmondo et Seberg l’avait fait sur cette même avenue trente-six ans plus tôt.

« Quel est votre endroit préféré, à Paris ? » ai-je demandé tout à trac.

Sans hésiter, il a embrassé les Champs-Élysées d’un grand geste de la main.

« Ça. Ça, c’est Paris pour moi. » ♦

(*Traduit de l’anglais par Valéry Lameignère.*)

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Molly Ringwald est une actrice, autrice et chanteuse. Elle vit à New York avec sa famille.

By Colin Stokes

By Rebecca Mead

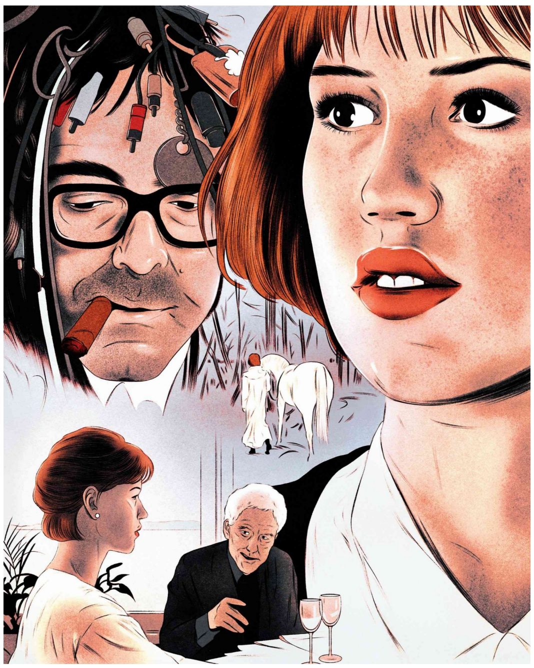
By Elizabeth C. Gorski

By Naomi Fry

Shooting Shakespeare with Jean-Luc Godard

The actress and writer recalls working with French cinema's enfant terrible.

By Molly Ringwald



The year was 1986, and I had just graduated from high school—both in real life and in the films of John Hughes. Onscreen, the high schools I attended were big and Midwestern, mostly situated in the suburbs of Chicago. In reality, if I wasn't filming or ditching class, I went to a small French school on the west side of Los Angeles called the Lycée Français, an institution I had so rarely attended in person that when I flew back from New York for one day to accept my diploma my mother referred to it as my "honorary degree." At the time, I was arguably one of the most recognizable high schoolers in America, but it had been a while since I had felt my age. When I left school a few weeks early to star in "The Pick-up Artist" with Robert Downey, Jr., in New York, I was already incorporated—and yet I still couldn't legally order a drink in a restaurant.

During that film shoot, I got a call from my agent telling me that the Franco-Swiss film director Jean-Luc Godard—who died this past September, at the

age of ninety-one—wanted to meet with me to discuss the possibility of my playing the role of Cordelia in an adaptation of “King Lear.” My only association with Godard at that point was a poster in the French clothing store agnès b. It was a collage of images from some of his most iconic movies—“Contempt,” “Alphaville,” “Pierrot le Fou.” I was drawn to the style, especially Jean Seberg’s fetching pixie cut in “Breathless.” I bought the poster but had yet to watch any of the films.

The prospect of performing Shakespeare was daunting. I had never tackled it in its original form, though coincidentally my first movie role had been in another modern adaptation of a Shakespearean classic. At thirteen, I played Miranda, the daughter of John Cassavetes’s Prospero (renamed Phillip), in Paul Mazursky’s “Tempest.” My agent told me that “King Lear” was worth considering, since Godard was an important if esoteric director and she knew that I was itching for something less mainstream. As much as I loved working with Hughes, I didn’t want to be seen as only a teen starlet, and I had never felt entirely comfortable being thrust into the role of spokesperson for a generation when I was still trying to pass algebra.

She said that Norman Mailer was also involved (though she wasn’t exactly sure in what capacity) and encouraged me to at least take the meeting. To prepare, I read a paperback of “King Lear” I had picked up at the Strand and then rented “Breathless” at a video store and watched Seberg and her co-star, Jean-Paul Belmondo, entranced.

On a day off from work, I took a cab alone to meet Godard and the producer Tom Luddy uptown in a suite at the Sherry Netherland. Luddy greeted me at the door and led me into the living room, where we both sat making small talk—so small, I don’t even remember what it was about. The director made an entrance after a couple of minutes, and from then on I was aware only of his commanding presence. Godard paced the room, scrutinizing me through his glasses, which had thick, tinted lenses. His curly hair was wild and unruly on the sides, and he was mostly bald on top. He seemed old to me then, and it’s astonishing to think that he was actually only a few years older than I am now. I politely inquired if there was a script that I could read. As he puffed on a big cigar, filling the room with pungent smoke, he shook his head no but said that he would explain the idea to me.

For the next forty minutes or so, he outlined the film in his heavily accented but distinctive monotone. I tried my best to follow his interpretation (what he called “an approach”). He never sat down, but stopped pacing every so often to relight his cigar. Tom Luddy shot nervous glances at me as I listened. I gleaned that in Godard’s version Lear was an American mobster named Don Learo—which he pronounced “lay-*ah*-ro”—and so it followed that his youngest daughter, Cordelia, should be American as well. When he finished speaking, I asked only two questions. The first was: Why did he want me to play the part? He smiled as if he had anticipated the question. He replied that, as a young movie star, I was the closest thing America had to a princess. I suspected the more likely truth was that, based on the success of the John Hughes films, I was bankable and could help him secure financing.

The other question was where the movie would be filmed. The answer: either Switzerland or Malibu, depending on who would be cast as Lear. It was down to two choices: Rod Steiger or Burgess Meredith. Steiger, who won an Academy Award for “In the Heat of the Night” in 1968, the year I was born, would do it only if he could film near his home in Malibu. Meredith, an actor whom I knew primarily from reruns of the nineteen-sixties TV show “Batman,” in which he played the Penguin, but whose multifaceted career began in the theatre in 1929, was willing to travel. If he was cast, the shoot would take place in Switzerland, which is where Godard lived and, I believe, at that point preferred to work. I wasn’t sure what had happened with Mailer. The shoot was supposed to take two weeks, much less time than I normally had to commit to. The project was just strange enough to spark my curiosity.

Frankly, I found the French angle hard to resist. From the time I was a child in suburban Sacramento, watching Julia Child on TV with my mom, I viewed France as the epitome of culture. After my family moved to L.A., I chose to go to the Lycée because my beloved on-set tutor, Irene Brafstein, had tutored Jodie Foster before me, and Jodie (whom I admired) had gone there and was enviably fluent in French. Entering a French-speaking school in the tenth grade, however, made me feel as though I was playing a perpetual game of catch-up. Undaunted, I attended a camp in the French town of Hyères with a Lycée schoolmate the summer after I completed “The Breakfast Club.” By then, I had become a full-blown Francophile, devouring the books of Colette and Simone de Beauvoir, as well as of Fitzgerald and

Hemingway, both of whom had carved out a life abroad, imbued with a kind of expat languor that I aspired to experience myself one day. In "The Breakfast Club," I had even improvised a line that John Hughes kept in the final cut in which my character, Claire, daydreams about where she would like to be—in France. It seemed destined that I would eventually work with one of French cinema's most important directors, so I signed on.

I had been told that Woody Allen, whose filmmaking clout was then at its zenith, was playing the Fool in "King Lear." Accompanied by "The Pick-up Artist" 's still photographer, Brian Hamill, who regularly worked with him, I stopped by Michael's Pub, where Allen played clarinet with a jazz ensemble most Monday nights. After Brian introduced us, I mentioned that I had agreed to do the film with Godard and asked what his experience had been like, since he had already filmed his part. Allen described being draped in film strips while quoting Shakespeare and feeling like . . . well, a fool, although his character was referred to as the Editor. He told me that he hoped I would have a better experience. It was not encouraging.

I spent the fall originating the title role in the Horton Foote play "Lily Dale" Off Broadway, and then flew back to Los Angeles to spend the holidays with my family. I received multiple telegrams and a written outline with drawings from Godard, who seemed genuinely elated that I had agreed to do his film. Before the age of the Internet, a telegram was the fastest way to send a message without picking up the phone. By the late eighties, telegrams already seemed old-fashioned, but I found their conjuring of another era glamorous. I don't think I'd ever been sent one before.

That March, I flew out of J.F.K. on the Concorde with Tom Luddy and Burgess Meredith, who had ultimately got the part of Lear. We were headed to Switzerland by way of Paris. It was only the second film I'd made without one of my parents accompanying me on set, and my contract stipulated that the producers had to fly a girlfriend of mine from L.A. to meet me in Switzerland, so that I wouldn't be alone. The Concorde, with its sleek body and pointed nose, was as chic and elegant as an Irving Penn model.



Molly Ringwald and Angie Campolla-Sanders, photographed at Château de Nyon, Switzerland, in 1987.Photograph by Julie Delpy / Courtesy Angie Campolla-Sanders

We arrived in Paris a little less than three and a half hours later, and, in a panic, I realized that somehow I'd lost my passport. It was a testament to Godard's status in France that I was able to obtain a new one almost immediately. With just a slight delay, we took off on another flight and landed in Geneva. From there we were driven to Nyon, to the Beau Rivage Hotel, where the cast would be both staying and filming.

By this time, I had some sense of the plot, which seemed to have changed since my original meeting with Godard and even since the outline he had sent to me in Los Angeles. The narrative was now roughly this: The world has been destroyed, post-Chernobyl, and a puckish little man named William Shakespeare Jr. The Fifth is tasked with re-creating his famous ancestor's work. The avant-garde opera director Peter Sellars was cast as Shakespeare's descendant, and Godard inserted himself in a role that doesn't appear in any Shakespeare play: Herr Doktor Pluggy—an inventor who wears a contraption on his head, with cables dangling, doing research in pursuit of something called "the image."

Before we started filming, I asked someone from the production team when I would meet makeup, hair, and wardrobe, and was told that I would be doing my own. I was also informed that Godard would be stopping by my room to choose Cordelia's costumes from the clothes I had brought with me.

It was the first I'd heard of this, and I suddenly wished I had been more selective in my packing. I went back to my room, picked out a nice sweater and skirt, tied a scarf in my hair, and carefully applied my makeup. Then I wrote postcards while I waited for Godard, the contents of my suitcase neatly arranged on the bed. When I greeted him and an assistant at the door, he took one look at my face and exclaimed, "No, no, no! Too much makeup! Take it off. If you must, just a little mascara, that's all." The "a" in "all" was pronounced as an "o," articulated in the exact same way he later asked me to pronounce Cordelia's answer to her father's question about what she will say to prove her love for him. "Not no-thing." *NO THING*. He split the word in two, and I could tell that this distinction was important to him, without really understanding why.

I looked forward to meeting my fellow cast members, though I hadn't been that thrilled to hear about Peter Sellars's involvement. Two years earlier, I had been led to believe that I would be offered the role of Nina in his version of "The Seagull," with Colleen Dewhurst, at the Kennedy Center, but at the last minute I was told that the part would go to Kelly McGillis. This seemed unfair to me at the time, since Nina was an actual teen-ager like me. I was still nursing a grudge, and as we began filming I confess I took some pleasure in watching Godard treat Sellars dismissively, when it was clear that the opera director idolized him.

I found out that Norman Mailer had been Godard's original Lear, though I still didn't know exactly what had happened with him. Among the cast and crew, I heard talk that the writer and his daughter, who'd been cast as Cordelia, had stayed in the same hotel—filmed in the same room, in fact, in which Burgess and I were now filming—and that, after a couple of days, Mailer had left following a dispute with the director, taking his daughter with him. It seemed peculiar and intriguing to me, and Godard was still grumbling about it.

The French actress Julie Delpy was playing Virginia (Woolf) in the film; the director Leos Carax had the role of Edgar (not Lear's eldest son, as one might expect but, rather, Edgar Allan Poe). Julie was a year younger than I was but knew far more about Godard than I did. She had already acted in a small part in his 1985 movie "Detective"; it had been her first film role. "He's a genius," she solemnly assured me. When I wasn't working, my

friend Angie and I explored the town with her. Julie spoke broken English back then, and I spoke broken French, and we practiced our respective languages together while she went around inexplicably throwing bang snaps on the ground in front of strangers, howling with laughter at the alarm of her chosen targets. I don't know where she got them, but I wouldn't be entirely surprised if they were from Godard.

One day, Godard sneaked into Burgess's room and short-sheeted his bed. I noticed that the director seemed to derive satisfaction from provoking people, but, fortunately for me, his pranks were generally directed toward men.

Burgess had an easy, unpretentious sophistication that I admired. Unlike me, he was no stranger to the avant-garde. He had made his Broadway début in Eva Le Gallienne's "Romeo and Juliet," in 1930, and through the years had worked with everyone—Kurt Weill, John Steinbeck, James Baldwin, Otto Preminger, Jean Renoir. Still, Burgess found it disconcerting that he would prepare the lines Godard had given him the night before and then arrive on set to find that Godard had thrown them all out. Burgess didn't mind the experimental—he only wanted to be let in on the process. These kinds of games can feel infantilizing to an actor, and it was only thanks to his good humor that he didn't abandon the production the way Mailer had.

Over dinners at the hotel's white-tablecloth restaurant, which overlooked Lake Geneva, Burgess and I speculated about what our inscrutable director was up to. Burgess, a wine aficionado, would order the best bottles on the menu—a Château Petrus '82, say—which greatly impressed the staff. We were joined often by my friend Angie, sometimes by Julie, and at least once by Sellars (whom I'd since forgiven). Burgess wore a variety of jaunty caps over his shock of white hair and regaled us with stories about his life. His light-blue eyes were sharp, and twinkled the way I had once imagined Santa Claus's did. At the time, he was planning on writing a memoir disguised as a book of wines he'd enjoyed through the years. My favorite anecdote was when, as a young man, he was "summoned" by Tallulah Bankhead to her suite at the Gotham Hotel, in Manhattan. "That's when you really knew you'd arrived!" he told us with a roguish grin. He wore his nicest suit, thinking that he was going to have a tête-à-tête with Bankhead. She greeted him at the door completely naked, a champagne glass in hand and a

bacchanal raging behind her. “Burgess, dahling!” she cried. He said that one thing led to another, until eventually he found himself with her in flagrante in one of the bedrooms.

“And then, just before the *petite mort*, she whispers in my ear, ‘Don’t come inside me, Burgess dahling—I’m engaged to Jock Whitney!’ ” he said. “And the champagne she was drinking was . . .” Honestly, he made the Brat Pack seem like a bunch of Mennonites.

Godard never dined with us. It’s a shame that he sequestered himself from everyone, because, considering how much he revered cinema and old Hollywood, I have a feeling he would have loved Burgess’s stories. Looking back on it now, I think he was actually a bit shy, trapped in his mind. Perhaps the only way he could make sense of anything was to film and edit it.

One day, about halfway through the shoot, Burgess reported to me that there was fake blood on the bedsheets in the room where we were filming, and asked me if I knew anything about it. I didn’t.

“What do you think he’s up to?” he mused. I figured it was another one of Godard’s jokes, a prank meant to get under Burgess’s skin and rattle him—turn him into the blustery, confused old man he had envisioned as Lear. Years later, however, I found out from this magazine’s film writer Richard Brody, in “Everything Is Cinema,” his 2008 biography of Godard, that the blood was meant to symbolize Cordelia’s virginity. Brody’s analysis confirmed something I had heard from Mailer a decade before: that Godard had been exploring the idea of a sexual relationship between Lear and his daughter. That was never a consideration in my mind on set, but I came to understand later that it was part of the reason Mailer had left the production (apart from having the script he had written thrown out by Godard).

In 1998, I had run into Mailer at a party, and as soon as I mentioned the Godard film his eyes bulged and he grabbed my arm to lead me into a quiet vestibule so that he could tell me his side of the story, which was basically that Godard was a monster. Mailer told me that he was offended by the incest angle, both because the director had cast Mailer and his daughter Kate in the roles and because he was using their actual names. Godard had been

furious when he lost his Lear, and he was no less forgiving when he cut the finished film, choosing to leave in much of what he shot of the Mailers during the opening credits and adding a withering voice-over in which he refers to Norman sarcastically as "the Great Writer." After ten years, Mailer was still incensed, and it seemed that the act of recounting Godard's audacity was both painful and pleasurable to him.

Godard didn't try using Burgess's and my real names in the movie, as he had with Norman and Kate. He must have known that he would have met with the same resistance. But, anyway, Burgess wasn't my real father. Both of us were mature enough to have handled the interpretation—it wasn't as if he was asking us to do a sex scene—but, clearly, he didn't want to take the chance. Perhaps he just enjoyed the clandestine, the getting away with something.

All the clothing I wear in the film is indeed from what I brought with me, with the exception of a thick, heavy white linen nightgown that I have on in the scene in which Cordelia dies. Spoiler: she dies in Godard's version, too, but not much else corresponds to the original text. Aside from a few lines that I quote from "King Lear," much of the Shakespeare I was asked to read was either from a sonnet (Sonnet 47, which Godard handed me to read into a boom mike while I perched on the edge of the tub in one of the hotel's bathrooms) or, as I recall, from Joan of Arc's lines in "Henry VI, Part 1." Godard's whispering narration in the film, which overlays the sound, gives an impression of what it might be like to hear voices, as Joan of Arc did, although I'm not sure if that was his intention.

During filming, I would sometimes ask Godard questions, like "Why is it such a small crew?" I had never done a film with so few people before. On "King Lear," a lighting adjustment would entail just moving a table lamp from one surface to another. "It's not necessary. These big film crews, *c'est ridicule*. . . ." he said, scoffing. "You don't need so many people to make a film." This may be partly true, but it's also possible that by 1987 Godard didn't command the kind of budget that would have allowed him to hire a large crew, even if he had wanted to. He was also essentially an introvert who didn't like to be around too many people. Small crews are easier to control, and in order to work with him you had to submit to his vision absolutely. This couldn't have been more different from my experience with

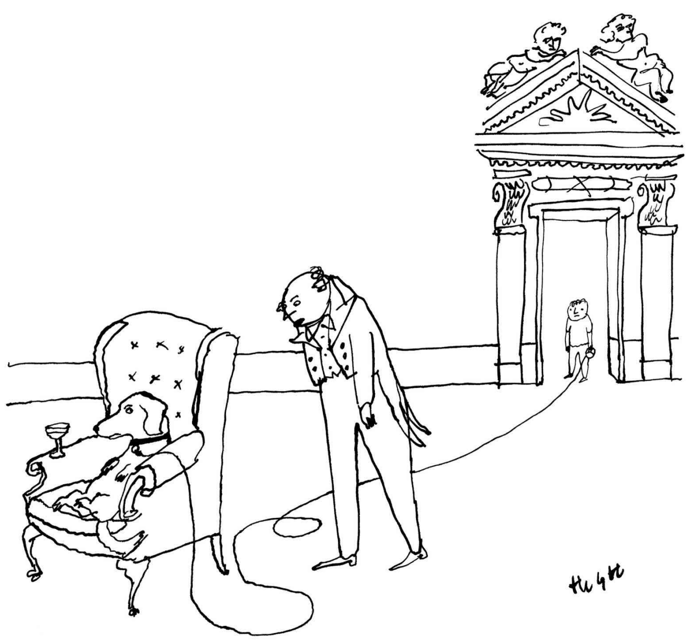
other directors, particularly John Hughes, which had always felt collaborative.

When I watch "King Lear" now, I'm struck by how extremely still and vigilant I seem. My back is straight and at times it almost looks as though I'm in a photograph—until I speak or move. Godard was exacting about every single gesture, and I found that it was easier to do precisely as he liked. Once, before I filmed a scene of Cordelia waking up in bed, I asked if he wanted me to wake up slowly, and he looked at me as if the question were absurd: "No, you just wake up. Don't act." He expanded on this a little, telling me that in American films people were always acting, which to him was a cardinal sin.

I wish now that I had talked to Godard more, but I confess that my own shyness prevented me from doing so. I was intimidated by him. To me, the French were authority figures—they were my *professeurs* in high school.

Toward the end of the shoot, Godard mentioned that he deemed everything I did in the film completely authentic except for one moment. Of course, I was instantly riveted, and I asked him which one.

"I'll tell you when it's over," he said.



"The gentleman insists he knows you."
Cartoon by Roland High

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I didn’t forget. When I finished my scenes, I approached him to ask which moment, and he told me that it was the scene in which Cordelia lies next to her father, dead. This was completely nonsensical, since it was the last scene

that I filmed—it hadn't even been shot when he made the comment. So maybe my gender didn't render me entirely safe from his mischief.

After filming ended, Burgess, my friend Angie, and I flew back to the U.S. Burgess navigated us through the airport, barking out orders in the voice of the Penguin.

At the age of twenty-four, I followed through on the promise I'd made to my younger self and moved to Paris. When I told my French boyfriend that I had been in a Jean-Luc Godard film, he was stunned. In 1995, looking someone up on IMDb wasn't really a thing, and by then "King Lear" had reached a kind of mythic status in France for not having found distribution there. I don't know if it's an urban legend, but supposedly tomatoes were thrown at the screen at Cannes when the film premièred. I was never asked to attend the première. I saw the film with a couple of friends after buying a ticket to a showing in a mostly empty movie theatre in Los Angeles, where it played for a very short time. It was just as confusing to me then as it had been when I filmed it. Seeing the completed film didn't clarify anything—even now, the fact that in 2012 Richard Brody put it first on his list of the "Ten Greatest Films of All Time" still bewilders me. In the theatre in L.A., I was surprised to see that Godard had kept the part with the Mailers, and I had to laugh at his nerve.

While living in France, I noticed that the people I met in the French film business seemed to define themselves as being either for or against New Wave cinema, Godard in particular. The newest crop of filmmakers was decidedly anti-intellectual. "Oh, he's a bore," a famous French comedic actor told me. "It's everything that's wrong with French film. The incessant navel-gazing."

For my part, I couldn't stop thinking about Godard. He was like a puzzle that I could never put together, but couldn't quite put back into the box, either. My friend Victoria Leacock, the daughter of the cinema-vérité pioneer Ricky Leacock, and I got the idea to do an interview with him as a short film and call it "Waiting for Godard." We decided that Victoria would film me as I took a train from Paris to Switzerland, and talked about the filming of "King Lear." Once there, I would find Godard and ask him what the hell it was all about. We figured that the "waiting" in the Beckett-

inspired title meant that we could do the film whether Godard agreed to be interviewed or not. "Call it 'En Train de Filmer,' " my French boyfriend suggested. "Trust me. He'll love the wordplay." Victoria's dad had formed a company with the American documentary filmmaker D. A. Pennebaker, which was nearly bankrupted in 1969, after Godard walked out on a film in which they were heavily invested. Her father had always told her that this led to the demise of Leacock-Pennebaker. We both had questions.

I took the chance and, using the French title my boyfriend had suggested, sent a letter to Godard's office in Rolle, Switzerland—like a message in a bottle. Not long afterward, my boyfriend and I were awakened in the middle of the night by that distinctive monotone drawling on the answering machine, agreeing to do the project.

In the fall of 1995, Godard and I met for lunch in Paris at a café just off the Champs-Élysées. I brought him a cigar. He smiled and tucked it into the breast pocket of his tweed sports coat as if he'd been expecting it. To me, he looked more or less the same as when I'd last seen him, though somehow smaller and less imposing. I was shocked to see him pour water into his wine before drinking it, but I didn't comment on it. We chatted about recent films. He didn't think much of "Pulp Fiction," the movie of the moment. "Not authentic," he declared. (That word again!) However, we both liked "Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould," a more obscure film by the French Canadian director François Girard. This time our conversation was conducted entirely in French, which was still difficult for me, and I struggled between the formal *vous* and the familiar *tu*. He didn't ease my discomfort. On the contrary, he almost seemed to relish it. This wasn't exactly surprising, since the tutoyer question was significant enough for him to include a line about it in at least one of his films. In the 1964 movie "Band of Outsiders," Arthur (Claude Brasseur) asks Franz (Sami Frey) about a woman, Odile (played by Anna Karina, Godard's former wife and subsequent muse), whom they both covet: "Have you used the *tu* with her yet?" When Franz says no, Arthur boasts, "I can have her whenever I want." Words mattered to Godard—he was obsessed with them, in fact, and although younger generations had been chipping away at the formal usage for years, Jean-Luc Godard wasn't having any of it. He was the most formal formalist I've ever known.

What was surprising was a moment, striking in its vulnerability, when he confided to me that he had been "moved" by my letter and told me that other actresses—American actresses, he implied, mentioning Jean Seberg and Jane Fonda—had never wanted to have anything more to do with him. I made a mental note to ask him more about this when Victoria and I shot our film, but then a job took me back to the U.S. for months, and our film was put on hold. I try not to have too many regrets in life, but not having pursued the making of this short film is one of them.

That day, at the end of lunch, after we left the restaurant, we walked out on the Champs-Élysées together. The autumn sky had already started to darken, and the neon lights of the stores and restaurants on the boulevard were just beginning to fluoresce. He asked where I lived, and I told him in the Marais, across from the Winter Circus.

"Near Père Lachaise," he remarked.

"Yes," I said. "Not too far."

We strolled for a bit, as Belmondo and Seberg had on that same street thirty-six years before.

"What's your favorite part of Paris?" I asked him on impulse. Without hesitation, he gestured toward the grand boulevard. "This. This is Paris for me." ♦

By Richard Brody

By Richard Brody

By Max Norman

By Saïd Sayrafiezadeh

Poems

- **“Water Like a Stone”**
- **“Cardinals”**

By Angela Leighton

Audio: *Read by the author.*

Christmas, a cold day—
and lost to ourselves in a windless heaven
with all that story fallen away
(peace and goodwill, a baby in the hay)
we walk uphill from the world's quarrelling,

our company, weather—
true cosmopolitan fetched from elsewhere,
drifter-stranger, and we together
following the night's sketchy snow for a trail
to the late moon's uplands, one step away,

reach a small shore—
water polished to a drumskin of ice,
where each skimmed stone knocks for a door
to leave, but skips, teasing with repeats,
its note multiplying birds of nowhere.

It's as if you heard
creation's chip skidding high and clear
over glacial wastes, and imagined a bird—
one, then another—voiced from sound waves,
shivered from the physics of touch and air.

My one last throw . . .
A stone to try this basin of iced rain,
the tarn's soundboard struck accelerando
to scatter, for luck, a kerfuffle of bird notes—
and win a love song from the earth's deep cold.

This is drawn from "Something, I Forget."

By Rivka Galchen

By Françoise Mouly

By Françoise Mouly

By Grace Henes

By Daniel Halpern

Audio: *Read by the author.*

Snow covering the garden shovel
and roots of the river birch.
A fence and the forest flowing beyond,
white, the air above
sprinkled with blood.

By Anthony Lane

By The New Yorker

By The New Yorker

By John Cassidy

Profiles

- **The C.E.O. of Anti-Woke, Inc.**

The C.E.O. of Anti-Woke, Inc.

By mocking corporate virtue-signalling on climate change and racial justice, the biotech founder Vivek Ramaswamy is becoming a right-wing star.

By Sheelah Kolhatkar



In June, as the sun set on Dublin, Ohio, a well-to-do suburb of Columbus, several dozen people dressed in golf shirts and floral shifts filed into a small auditorium to listen to a talk by a new neighbor. Vivek Ramaswamy, a thirty-seven-year-old entrepreneur, had settled in the area with his wife and toddler son after making a large fortune as the founder of a biotech company. Now, thanks to dozens of appearances on Fox News to criticize "cultural totalitarianism" enforced by liberal élites, he was closing in on fame as a conservative pundit. In the past year, he had cast aspersions on Black Lives Matter and "the death of merit"; mask mandates and U.S.-border protection; public-school curricula and the actor Jussie Smollett. All the flame-throwing had established him, in the words of one anchor, as the network's "woke and cancel-culture guru."

Ramaswamy has perfect-looking teeth, a high forehead, and a thick shock of hair that rises into a swirl at his crown. Out on the sidewalk, he'd hastily replaced his flip-flops with sneakers, in a nod to formality. At the front of

the auditorium, perched on a stool, he spoke into his microphone with a showman's brio, as if addressing a far larger crowd. He enjoyed forums like this, "where there's no agenda, there's no objective, other than to create spaces for open conversation, for people to be free to say, and feel free to say, the kinds of things that they might have wanted to say behind closed doors," he said, smiling brightly. The true test of the strength of a democracy was not, he argued, how many people voted. It was "the percentage of people who feel free to say what they actually think, in public."

One of the opinions he wished to air to those assembled was that "woke-ism"—a belief system that Ramaswamy sees as an insidious secular creed—has overtaken religious faith, patriotism, and the work ethic as a key American value. Corporate virtue-signalling and hypocrisy are everywhere, he told the audience. "Let's muse about the racially disparate impact of climate change as you fly on a private jet to Davos," he said, to laughter from the nearly all-white crowd. C.E.O.s were recruiting "token" people of color for their boards in the name of diversity while refusing to seek out diverse points of view. The Walt Disney Company was self-righteously protesting Florida's "Don't Say Gay" law after cutting deals with the repressive Chinese government to film footage for "Mulan" in Xinjiang.

To Ramaswamy, such corporate do-gooderism—and especially environmental, social, and governance investing, known as E.S.G.—is a smoke screen designed to distract from the less virtuous things that companies do to make money. Amazon donates to organizations that aid Black communities while firing workers trying to unionize. Nike produces advertisements with the civil-rights activist and former N.F.L. quarterback Colin Kaepernick while exploiting workers in Asia. Many such companies, he intimated to the audience, were building tacit alliances with the Democratic élite.

That corporations are given to hypocrisy is hardly a novel observation. But Ramaswamy's twist on the familiar critique, which he laid out last year in a book entitled "Woke, Inc.: Inside Corporate America's Social Justice Scam," is to place E.S.G. investing at asset-management firms like BlackRock, Vanguard, and State Street at the center of what ails American life. He calls this kind of socially conscious investing—not political corruption or dark money, not election denialism, not disinformation—the gravest danger that

American democracy faces today. E.S.G., he told his audience, lets the private sector "do through the back door what our government couldn't directly get done through the front door."

The three top asset-management firms collectively hold more than twenty trillion dollars in retirement funds and other capital, about the same as the national gross domestic product. And the stocks that the firms control give them extraordinary influence over almost every public company in the world. "It's not a right-leaning issue, it's not a left-leaning issue," he said. Private-sector attempts to address climate change are not only laughably insincere, he argued; they're encroaching on work that should be done by the government—and only if the citizens agree.

Ramaswamy's crusade against E.S.G. is based on a pair of seemingly contradictory ideas: that attempts by companies to address societal problems are cynical and ineffective, and that those attempts also pose an existential threat to the democratic process. But such inconsistencies are often obscured by Ramaswamy's frictionless oratorical style—a brisk patter, peppered with references to Hobbes and Hayek, that wends toward well-modulated moments of outrage. In Dublin, his words had gray and blond heads bobbing in agreement.

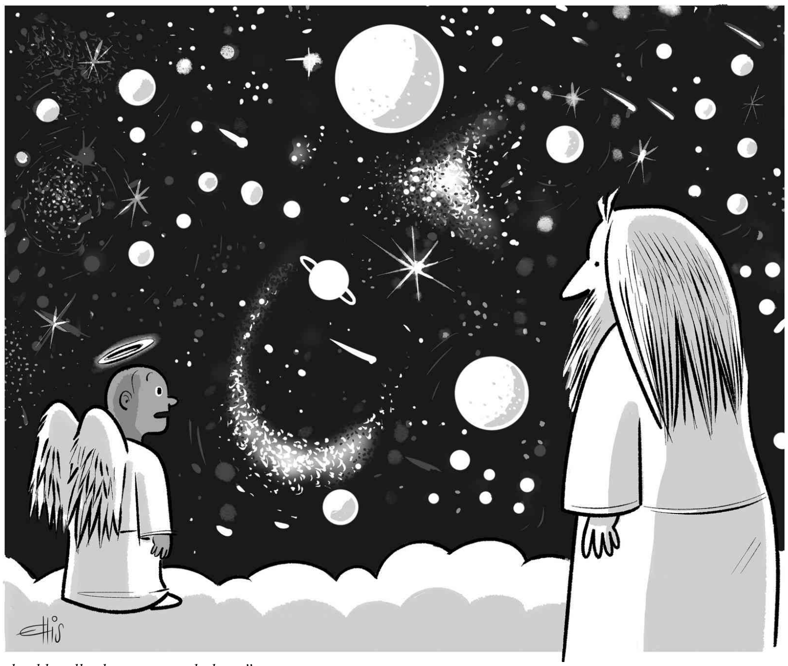
Ramaswamy's mother worked as a geriatric psychiatrist; his father was an engineer and a patent lawyer at General Electric. They came to the U.S. from South India before Vivek was born, in 1985. Growing up in the Cincinnati area, Vivek established himself as an overachiever: an accomplished pianist, a nationally ranked tennis player, and the valedictorian of his Jesuit high school. He graduated from Harvard College and Yale Law School, worked at a hedge fund, then started a pharmaceutical company, Roivant Sciences, where he made hundreds of millions of dollars. That a chunk of this wealth derived from a failed effort to bring an Alzheimer's drug to market is something he doesn't dwell on in speeches.

After Ramaswamy emerged from that failure, his cutting one-liners, which he deployed in "Woke, Inc." and on Twitter, attracted notice at Fox News, and last year he left his pharmaceutical venture behind. His mother, Geetha, had never heard of Tucker Carlson or watched Fox News before her son started showing up on the network. "I wish he could be on other channels as

well," she told me. But, to her chagrin (and to his, though he's slower to admit it), other networks weren't biting.

In recent years, Ramaswamy has contemplated a move into politics—something he discussed with a friend from law school, J. D. Vance, a venture capitalist who was just elected to the U.S. Senate in Ohio. But if the event in Dublin, organized by a marketing executive, felt vaguely like a campaign stop, Ramaswamy was there to promote more than policy ideas. Although he'd begun his talk by saying "there's no agenda," it eventually turned into a sales pitch for an investment company he'd just started. The company, Strive Asset Management, had the financial backing of the billionaire Peter Thiel, Vance's V.C. firm, and other investors, and intended to compete with BlackRock and its peers. Although Ramaswamy was still hiring and searching for office space, he told the audience that Strive would soon offer investment funds, at fees competitive with BlackRock's, that wouldn't ask the companies it invested in to "push political agendas." It would ask them only to deliver quality products and services and to make money for shareholders.

As the talk concluded, anti-woke investing didn't appear to be foremost on attendees' minds. Two women descended on Ramaswamy with smiles as broad as his own. They'd founded their own K-12 school after criticizing what was being taught at their children's private school. They planned to center virtue and patriotism in their new curriculum. Would Ramaswamy like to meet with them to discuss it further? (He would.) Two more women approached: would he attend their "Freedom Rally"? (He was supportive but noncommittal.) A man with a thick and bristly mustache pulled in close, stared him in the eyes, and asked, "When's the last time you read 'The Art of War'?" ("Uh, high school?") Ramaswamy turned away to relieve his wife, Apoorva, a doctor who was eight and a half months pregnant, of their restless two-year-old son. By the time he turned back, a woman in a bright-red top was confiding that she, too, was concerned about the local schools. As Ramaswamy's son dipped his hand in a cup of water and appeared ready to burst into tears, the woman said, "We've worked so hard to get rid of the gender-identity stuff. Now we want to . . ."

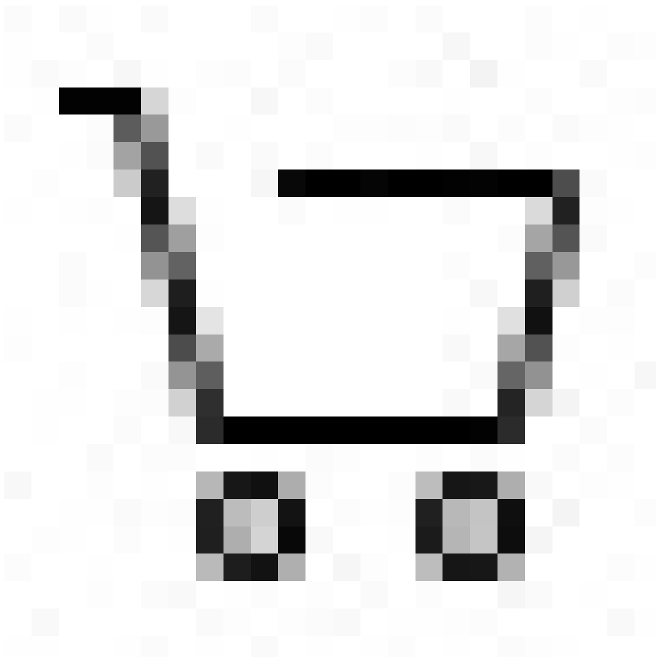


"You should really clean up your desktop."
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

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A shadow flickered across Ramaswamy's face. "Don't talk about that so much," he told her while also signalling to his wife and a body man who was travelling with him that it was time to move on. "Talk about what you want to replace it with instead—civic education, American history, patriotism."

The term "woke," which dates back nearly a century, was initially used in Black communities to describe a raising of consciousness and has since become a catchall denoting awareness of a range of social-justice issues. In recent years, "wokeness" has also become, in conservative circles, a subject of suspicion and ridicule: shorthand for performative righteousness, like "political correctness" before it. Opposition to woke principles has become a business opportunity, too. A former Green Beret has found success with a "patriotic" coffee brand, Black Rifle, based in Salt Lake City. The conservative commentator Sara Gonzales founded American Beauty, a cosmetics company "for women who love America." (Lipstick shades include Freedom Fighter and Triggered.) Vanessa Santos, who runs a right-leaning public-relations firm called Red Renegade PR, told me that the market for anti-woke goods is niche but ardent. "People want to buy something that's patriotic," Santos told me, and "they want to know the kind of person who's behind the product."

Ramaswamy's Strive isn't even the only "anti-woke" asset-management firm to launch in the past few years. In 2020, the money managers William Flaig and Tom Carter started the American Conservative Values E.T.F., a fund that boycotts companies deemed to be supporting a liberal agenda. 2ndVote Funds, which offers two products and emphasizes conservative and faith-based values, appeared the same year. Last month, Strive surpassed both outfits in size, announcing that it had more than five hundred million dollars in investment assets after its first three months.

What Strive sells are E.T.F.s—exchange-traded funds, which consist of a basket of stocks or bonds, similar to a mutual fund. The first E.T.F. that the firm introduced invests in energy companies. It was soon followed by an E.T.F. that focusses on the semiconductor industry. Strive also began a publicity campaign targeting seven companies—Amazon, Apple, Chevron, Citigroup, Disney, ExxonMobil, and Home Depot—that Ramaswamy claims would be more profitable if they abandoned their E.S.G. goals.

The creation of firms like Ramaswamy's represents a countermovement to a phenomenon that itself was a countermovement. E.S.G. investing arose in part as a response to the concept of shareholder primacy, which Milton Friedman famously articulated in a 1970 essay in the *Times*. Corporations should not be concerned with the public interest, such as reducing discrimination and pollution, he argued. Managers' only duty was to maximize the profits of shareholders, the company's true owners—an idea that, for obvious reasons, was instantly appealing to many investors.

The opposing argument, which came to be known as stakeholder capitalism, contended that when companies made decisions they had a responsibility—financial as well as ethical—to everyone affected by their dealings. As such, they might weigh factors other than profit, such as environmental impacts and the well-being of workers and communities. The term "E.S.G." was first formally proposed in a 2004 U. N. Global Compact report. Specific ways of measuring a company's E.S.G. performance have since been refined into a scoring system. Pension-fund managers, for example, might use the scores to evaluate long-term risks such as climate change and demographic shifts, to avoid squandering the money of workers who would depend on their retirement funds in the future. Some companies game their E.S.G. scores and exaggerate their "responsible" choices as a cynical marketing strategy.

But even companies that take the goals seriously aren't motivated primarily by virtue. Rebecca Henderson, a Harvard Business School professor who consults with companies on sustainability, said, "I promise you, these companies want to make money." But, she added, executives are also eager to stay viable in a future in which carbon might be taxed and more employees and consumers will avoid companies that pollute heedlessly or mistreat their workers.

Larry Fink, BlackRock's C.E.O. and a proponent of E.S.G. investing, is a favorite target of Ramaswamy. As a shepherd of around eight trillion dollars in investor money, Fink has urged companies to adopt plans to become carbon neutral and ultimately transition to a post-carbon economy. Ramaswamy contends, without citing specific evidence, that Fink is collaborating with political élites on such matters: promoting environmental policies that they have failed to push through Congress. He has attacked Fink's supposed liberal agenda so assiduously that a newcomer to U.S. politics might, after imbibing conservative media, mistake the BlackRock C.E.O.—one of the most powerful men on Wall Street—for a darling of the American left.

BlackRock's business is more complicated than Ramaswamy suggests. For instance, not all of its funds are E.S.G.-based. (A company spokesperson notes that less than six per cent of its assets under management are in "dedicated sustainable investing strategies.") Last year, BlackRock announced that it would allow investors in some of its funds to participate in company shareholder votes on matters such as executive compensation and climate policies, rather than BlackRock voting on their behalf.

Some skeptics of Ramaswamy speculate that, for all his insinuations about Fink's alliances, he's part of a well-established campaign that is guided by right-wing mega-donors and is intent on sabotaging climate-change measures. Ramaswamy dismisses such notions; he's down, he says, with the "grassroots" people—conservative patriots who are fuelling anti-E.S.G. backlash that has reached Republican-controlled legislatures from Texas to West Virginia. In October, Louisiana announced that it would withdraw nearly eight hundred million dollars from BlackRock. Similarly, Florida later declared that it would divest two billion dollars from the company.

Bill Ackman, the founder of Pershing Square Capital, a fifteen-billion-dollar hedge fund, was, behind Thiel and his affiliates, the second-biggest seed investor in Strive. Still, he told me, he disagrees with much of what Ramaswamy says: “My experience, at least with the companies we know, is that being thoughtful with everything from packaging to environmental considerations is generally something that’s good for business. If Exxon were smarter, they probably should have made some earlier-stage investments. They should have put up capital in the first round of Tesla.” Nonetheless, Ackman appreciates Ramaswamy’s emphasis on what he thinks is an unhealthy concentration of capital in the asset-management industry. “A world in which three fund managers are controlling corporate America is not a world that’s good for America,” Ackman said. Because BlackRock and its competitors make most of their money through fees, he said, and don’t own the stock they control on behalf of their investors, they have little at stake in the outcome of policies that they’re promoting.

Tariq Fancy, who until 2019 worked as BlackRock’s global chief investment officer for sustainable investing, has doubts about both Ramaswamy and E.S.G. He has concluded that sustainable investing, at least as BlackRock was practicing it, is counterproductive. E.S.G. creates an illusion of progress that allows people to avoid harder, more meaningful ways of addressing climate change and other problems. He said that most E.S.G. investing (which he differentiated from corporations trying to make themselves “greener”) takes the form of divestment—choosing not to put money in, say, fossil-fuel companies. Such discrete redirections of resources, he suggests, are unlikely to build into movements powerful enough to provoke broad policy change. “Look at the Middle East,” Fancy said. “They’d talk about not having investments in alcohol, but they never thought that it would stop people in France from drinking wine.” He also noted that Ramaswamy and other conservatives say that the government, not people like Larry Fink, should address climate change, but fail to acknowledge that the political and regulatory process has been distorted by corporate interests. “If they were serious, they would follow the argument to its natural conclusion,” he said. “You would want to get money out of politics. ” The more likely reality, Fancy believes, is that the Ramaswamys and Thiels of the world would prefer to see little to no government action on climate change, labor practices, diversity in boardrooms, or other issues.

When I asked Ramaswamy why he ignores how money in politics compromises the regulatory and legislative process, the issue seemed to bore him. People had been fretting about getting money out of politics for years, he said. His Larry-Fink-as-left-wing-bogeyman theory, by contrast, felt fresh.

But didn't the enormous concentration of wealth in the hands of a few pose a serious threat to democracy? Not necessarily, he replied. "You can buy your yachts, you can buy your houses, you can buy your nice cars, but you shouldn't be able to buy a greater share of voice as a citizen," he said. The ultra-wealthy *did* buy more of a voice, I pointed out, by influencing the political process at every level, from choosing the President and hiring lobbyists who write legislation to pouring money into school-board elections. He picked up his phone, as if to seek out a more interesting conversation. "I just don't think that's the biggest problem."

Shortly after Ramaswamy was born, his family commissioned his horoscope, which predicted that he was destined for greatness. He would later say that his family bestowed on him, their firstborn, a sense of "deep-seated superiority" and an expectation that he would outperform the "average mediocre Joes" with whom he went to school. Geetha told me that she and her husband, known as V. G., believed that Vivek and his younger brother, Shankar, as children of immigrants, would have to work harder to succeed than the children of American-born parents. "There are a lot of things we didn't know, being from India," she said.

In eighth grade, at a large and economically diverse public school, Vivek was "roughed up" and pushed down the stairs by a Black student. An injured hip required surgery, and his parents decided to enroll him in a private preparatory school. When I first asked Ramaswamy if that incident influenced his views on race, he seemed not to have thought much about it. But some days afterward he wondered aloud if the experience had precipitated his doubt that members of one underrepresented group had a unique claim on being discriminated against: "All human beings can be on both the giving and receiving end of that."

A strain of animus toward Black Americans runs through much of Ramaswamy's public commentary. After a foundation that has been

linked to Black Lives Matter was discovered to have spent donations on high-end real estate, he started to quip that B.L.M. should stand for "Big Lavish Mansions." In our conversations, he could be similarly antagonistic, as when he discussed how today's civil-rights activists—a group he defined as comprising Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, and Ibram X. Kendi—had "sold out" to corporate America. He couldn't say exactly how Kendi had sold out, but he believed that Jackson, the Baptist minister and former Presidential candidate, who is now in his eighties, had profiteered on his standing as a civil-rights leader. Ramaswamy likened this to extortion, but later clarified that the extortion attempts he meant to criticize were racial-equity audits conducted by the former Attorneys General Eric Holder and Loretta Lynch and their law firms. Corporations such as Starbucks and Verizon, he said, felt that to avoid accusations of racism they had to hire the firms, often at great expense, to assess their diversity policies.

"I definitely find the idea of systemic racism revolting," Ramaswamy told me. He allowed that it had existed in the U.S. at moments in the past, offering the era of slavery as one example. But racism was atrophying, he said, so societal goods should not be unevenly distributed on racial grounds. He mentioned a white, heavyset conservative male classmate at Harvard who was considered uncool, and argued that the social pecking order was stacked against him "more than some athletic Black kid who came and got a place on the basketball team." Ramaswamy blamed affirmative action and similar policies for forcing élite institutions to lower their standards, and said that the current narrative of systemic racism creates more racism than would otherwise exist. "Affirmative action is the single biggest form of institutionalized racism in America today," he concluded.

Ramaswamy's political awakening began not at home but in the company of a conservative-Christian piano teacher with whom he took private lessons from elementary through high school. As he worked his way from the easy Bach preludes to Mozart's "Rondo Alla Turca," the teacher, who became something of a godmother, railed against Hillary Clinton and extolled the virtues of free speech, patriotism, and Ronald Reagan.

A conservatism that puts its faith in unfettered markets would come to inform even Ramaswamy's understanding of caste relations in the Indian state of Kerala, where he spent summers with his family. Ramaswamy's

family is Brahmin, the highest caste in the Hindu hierarchy. In "Woke, Inc.," he maintains that "American-style capitalism" is repairing the damage of that pernicious system, writing approvingly that a "lower-caste guy" in India can now deliver Domino's pizza and "my family tips him to show their appreciation."

At Harvard, where he majored in biology, Ramaswamy joined the South Asian Association but was more interested in American politics. Identifying as a libertarian, he became president of the Harvard Political Union. He also performed Eminem covers and original free-market-themed rap songs as a kind of alter ego called Da Vek. Paul Davis, who lived in a dorm with Ramaswamy and later worked with him at his pharmaceutical company, said, "He knows his views and style rubbed some people the wrong way, but he didn't care."

At the time, Ramaswamy was irritated by what he saw as groupthink all around him. One of his classmates' campaigns, a push to raise wages for janitors on campus, prompted him to lash out in the *Harvard Crimson*. The article was an early demonstration of his glee at puncturing what he sees as liberal pieties. Those supporting a wage increase, he wrote, had inadvertently linked the "fundamental human worth" of the workers they were championing to the paychecks they received. True, a bigger paycheck might give the janitors more financial stability. But the higher pay—more than "the laws of supply and demand would require," he claimed—would signify that Harvard students felt sorry for the janitors. This would harm the janitors in other ways, as "a condescending strain of sympathy subtly yet naturally replaces the mutual human respect that otherwise would have existed."

The summer after Ramaswamy's sophomore year, he took an internship at a nine-billion-dollar hedge fund called Amaranth Advisors. He thought that working in the firm's biotech division, where a team of doctors and scientists evaluated stocks for the firm to invest in, might be more exciting than working in a lab. "Woke, Inc." records his disillusionment with the experience. He recalls Amaranth's founder, Nicholas Maounis, explaining to the summer interns that the purpose of a hedge fund was "to turn a pile of money into an even bigger pile of money." Ramaswamy joined a company-sponsored cruise, where he says he came to the attention of the firm's big

traders by winning a poker tournament. After that, they began taking him to extravagant restaurants and clubs with bottle service—indulgences subsidized by investor fees. “Even at the age of nineteen, it struck me as, like, this is not the way a company should be,” he said. The next year, after one of the firm’s traders reportedly lost several billion dollars in a week betting on natural-gas futures, Amaranth collapsed. (Maounis, through legal counsel at his new firm, Verition Fund Management, said that he recollected neither Ramaswamy nor the events he related.)



“There’s another route that’s ten minutes faster, but we won’t get to see what’s causing this slowdown.”
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

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Ramaswamy’s next summer internship, another disappointment, was at Goldman Sachs. He describes the inner workings of the firm as a charade, with jaded bankers in hand-tailored dress shirts doing little while making a show of how busy they were. He was especially struck by what was often

called Service Day, when employees engaged in volunteer projects around the city. One day, he recalled, he and some co-workers gathered at a park in Harlem for a tree-planting session. A Goldman boss showed up in Gucci boots, told the employees to take photographs to document their presence, and then split. The group reconvened shortly afterward at a bar. (A former Goldman executive who participated in the volunteer program for nearly two decades told me that, although the flavor of the episode seemed credible, it was hard to imagine an entire group abandoning a project before starting.)

When Ramaswamy remarked to a colleague that it should be called Social Day, not Service Day, the colleague asked him if he'd ever heard of the Golden Rule. To treat others as one wished to be treated, Ramaswamy offered. "No," the colleague told him. "He who has the gold makes the rules."

After graduating from Harvard, Ramaswamy took a job as a biotech-stock analyst at QVT, a hedge fund in New York City led by physicists he considered brilliant. He learned about financial engineering and how to evaluate investment opportunities, but after a couple of years he got restless. In 2010, he spent a day auditing classes at Yale Law School, where he'd previously deferred enrollment. Sitting in on a criminal-law course taught by Jed Rubenfeld, Ramaswamy was mesmerized.

"I am inherently interested in questions of justice," he told me. "It was a disciplined way to explore and figure out what I believed about things. I thought, I have to do this." While continuing to work at QVT, he enrolled at the law school. In the years he was there, he said, he made around ten million dollars. At Yale, he established important connections: with Vance, a fellow Cincinnati Bengals fan; Thiel, who hosted an intimate lunch seminar for select students, and who later staked him on a venture helping senior citizens access Medicare; and his future wife, Apoorva, who lived across the way from him while attending medical school.

Ramaswamy stayed at the hedge-fund job after getting his law degree, and also took a standup-comedy class. The course was "traumatizing," he said—he wasn't any good. But he did learn a trick that stuck: carrying around a notebook to capture passing thoughts or jokes as soon as they arose. While researching biotech companies for QVT, he began filling the notebook with

ideas and with impressions of executives he met. In 2014, these scribblings became the basis for Roivant, his pharmaceutical venture. It was a fine time to start a company. Venture-capital investors were flush with cash and searching for ambitious young men with startups that they could invest in.

The pharmaceutical-development process, which involves moving drugs through rounds of testing and approvals, is slow, and drugs are often abandoned along the way. Sometimes a drug doesn't work. Other times, the decision to drop a product is economic: executives determine that the drug, no matter how effective, won't be profitable, or won't align with their business strategy. Ramaswamy's idea was that Roivant could license drugs that had been left languishing, take them through the rest of the development process, and share the proceeds with the original manufacturer.

Ramaswamy had no experience running a company. Nonetheless, he'd soon declare that Roivant would be the "Berkshire Hathaway of drug development." He raised approximately ninety-three million dollars from investors, among them QVT. Roivant had around ten employees at the start, including Ramaswamy's mother and brother, and was organized in the spirit of a hedge fund, with subsidiaries that each specialized in a single medical issue, such as women's health or urology. Scientists and pharmaceutical experts hired for a subsidiary were offered equity in the company as an incentive to leave jobs at more established drugmakers. Ramaswamy's advisory board included several well-known Democrats, including Tom Daschle, the former Senate Majority Leader; Kathleen Sebelius, the former Secretary of Health and Human Services under President Barack Obama; and Donald Berwick, the former administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

Berwick was attracted to Roivant, he told me, because of its commitment to improving access to critical medicines. "I thought he had latched on to an important problem in that there are important drugs that don't get developed because they don't fit in the business model of the company, so these assets stay on the shelf," Berwick said. "His idea was to get them off the shelf by making them attractive. " In discussions with Ramaswamy, "politics never came up," Berwick said. What the founder did talk about was pricing drugs reasonably so that they'd be accessible to patients who needed them.

At the end of 2014, Roivant acquired one of its first drugs, an experimental Alzheimer's medication, from GlaxoSmithKline, for five million dollars up front. There is no effective treatment for Alzheimer's, and drug companies have spent billions of dollars trying to develop one. Geetha Ramaswamy had worked for pharmaceutical companies that were developing treatments for Alzheimer's and other cognitive disorders, and had clinical expertise that would be valuable to her son's company. The drug that Roivant bought, known as SB-742457, had been shelved even though in early trial phases it had shown signs of reversing mental decline when paired with an older drug called Aricept. Ramaswamy's company would owe G.S.K. a 12.5-per-cent royalty on net sales and other possible payments should it manage to bring SB-742457 to market.

In 2015, the biotech industry was in the midst of a boom—or, some might say, a bubble. Stock prices had been skyrocketing in an environment full of hype. Ramaswamy took advantage of the moment. He created a subsidiary in Bermuda to own the drug, and prepared to sell shares to the public before the medication, in combination with Aricept, began the pivotal Phase III clinical trial.

That June, the subsidiary, Axovant, raised more than three hundred million dollars through an initial public offering—a remarkable amount given that the subsidiary's value was based solely on the potential of one untested drug. As the drug, since renamed intepirdine, proceeded through the clinical trial, with around thirteen hundred patients, *Forbes* put Ramaswamy on its cover and called him "The 30-Year-Old CEO Conjuring Drug Companies from Thin Air." In the accompanying article, Ramaswamy declared, "This will be the highest return on investment endeavor ever taken up in the pharmaceutical industry." The following year, *Forbes* named him one of the richest entrepreneurs in America under the age of forty. But in September, 2017, with Axovant reportedly valued at around $2.6 billion, Ramaswamy received an unpleasant phone call. Intepirdine was a bust. It had failed to meaningfully improve the health or cognition of the patients in the clinical trial.

"It felt humiliating," Ramaswamy told me. Roivant had acquired another promising drug, to treat prostate cancer, that, when used in combination with a second drug, seemed to ease symptoms of uterine fibroids and

endometriosis. But the prostate medication was years away from coming to market. "I'd let people down. I took it hard," he said. Even now, he says, the wounds from the fiasco aren't fully healed. However, he's come up with a positive spin on it: "My latitude for being willing to fail big is a lot higher than it was then."

In the summer of 2019, the Business Roundtable, an association of more than two hundred C.E.O.s of the largest companies in the country, issued a new statement of corporate responsibility, saying that businesses should aim to operate ethically in addition to delivering profits to their shareholders. The statement was not binding for members, but it reflected anxieties about wealth inequality and about the declining financial security of the middle class. Around that time, individual companies, from Airbnb to Citigroup, issued their own statements on moral obligations. In January, 2020, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, David Solomon, the C.E.O. of Goldman Sachs, announced that the firm, in its U.S. and Western European markets, would no longer underwrite initial public offerings for companies whose boards lacked at least one "diverse" member. (That number is now two.)

Ramaswamy's notebook began filling up again. "Everyone was saying the exact same thing at the exact same time, and it got under my skin," he said. He submitted an op-ed to the *Wall Street Journal* in which he denounced "stakeholder capitalism" for advising powerful companies "to implement the social goals that their CEOs want to push." These were issues that should be decided by the citizenry, he wrote, through voting and policymaking. After the article ran, Ramaswamy relished the impact that he seemed to be having. "It wasn't like being at a dinner party, where I'm just sharing my opinions," he told me. "If I wasn't the one making that argument, I wasn't sure if anyone else would be taking that on. That was enjoyable, but it also came with some sense of responsibility. "

A book seemed like a natural next step. Seeking advice, he turned to Rubenfeld and his wife, Amy Chua, who is also a professor at Yale Law School and whose book "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother," about spurring her two daughters to become overachievers, had been a best-seller. (Chua had also mentored Vance at Yale and advised him on the writing of his memoir, "Hillbilly Elegy.") Around the time they met, Rubenfeld was under investigation by Yale for sexual harassment—a charge that he denies and

which led to a two-year suspension from the faculty. He heard out Ramaswamy's somewhat scattered ideas and suggested a tauter study of capitalism, democracy, and the changing culture of the American workplace. Rubenfeld said of Ramaswamy, "He is one of the most skilled people I know in terms of listening to criticism and learning from it." Ramaswamy accepted the advice, began writing trenchantly about his experiences in the Ivy League and the corporate world, and eventually took his proposal to a publisher of conservative authors, Center Street.

In May, 2020, as he was working on the manuscript, George Floyd was murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis, and cities across the country erupted with protests. Corporate executives began issuing statements expressing sympathy and support for racial justice. (A photo circulated of Jamie Dimon, the C.E.O. of JPMorgan Chase, kneeling in apparent solidarity.) Ramaswamy, unsurprisingly, was annoyed. "The murder of George Floyd was tragic," he wrote in "Woke, Inc.," "but it was also tragic that thousands of people of all races died of diseases every day that could be better treated by a broken health-care system." Employees at Roivant, too, wanted Ramaswamy to issue a statement of support for Black Lives Matter. Instead, he sent a company-wide e-mail that acknowledged the "painful" week and the protests, and advised his staff to "stay safe." This did not go over well. A colleague accused him of being "tone-deaf," and many of the young people Roivant had recruited demanded to know how the company was addressing systemic racism in its subsidiaries. He later wrote, "There was something curious to me about corporate America's fixation on the BLM movement, even as other obvious injustices continued to abound. I was personally appalled by China's persecution of its Uighur population." But, he went on, "none of my employees or directors expressed concern to me about these human rights violations."

In the aftermath of the January 6th attack on the Capitol by supporters of President Donald Trump, Ramaswamy co-authored a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed with Rubenfeld. They called the assault on the Capitol "disgraceful," but sounded more exercised that Twitter, Facebook, and other tech companies had suspended Trump's accounts on the ground that he had incited violence. The op-ed contended that the tech companies' decisions about whom to ban were politically motivated.

Members of Roivant's advisory board were following Ramaswamy's new career as a cultural critic, and some were distressed. In Berwick's view, Tucker Carlson and Fox News were toying with American democracy. Moreover, Berwick thought, Ramaswamy's regular public statements about how corporations did not exist to deliver social benefits ran counter to Roivant's original mission—to bring reasonably priced medicines to people who needed them.

The day after the *Journal* piece appeared online, Berwick resigned from Roivant's advisory board. Daschle and Sebelius quit, too. Ramaswamy was startled by the departures, particularly Berwick's, but he was unrepentant. A week and a half later, he went on Carlson's show to call on President Joe Biden to pressure Twitter to reinstate Trump.

"To me, he's assuming a status quo that does not exist," Berwick said. "Democracy is so under the gun right now. And the very forces that he's talking about, these moneyed forces, are part of the reason. His view is they should get out of the political scene entirely, and my view is they're in it—the money's there."

Just a few weeks after January 6th, Ramaswamy announced that he would step down from the business he'd founded to focus full time on his writing and political interests. Roivant had recovered from its Alzheimer's-drug failure, and he told me he realized that he "couldn't be a free-speaking citizen without hurting the company." He was also mulling a run for the Senate seat in Ohio held by Rob Portman, who said that he would not seek reëlection, in large part because of the polarization in Washington.

The Republican Party was perennially in need of candidates of color to diversify its ranks—especially those with stage presence and a good origin story. Ramaswamy was invited to a dinner attended by Kevin McCarthy, the House Minority Leader, and took the opportunity to raise the subject of his political future. He recalls McCarthy saying that he could do more good as a thought leader for the Party than as a junior member of Congress. Others he consulted suggested that a life in politics would be a source of misery and frustration.

Ramaswamy was also casting about for another business to start—maybe an anti-woke shoe company to compete with Nike, or an anti-woke beverage company to take on Coca-Cola. But conditions seemed more propitious for an “anti-BlackRock”—something much bigger than the anti-E.S.G. companies that had already formed.



“That’s the location for the after-picnic.”
Cartoon by Drew Dernavich

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At the time, a wave of anti-E.S.G sentiment was taking hold at the local level. States including Oklahoma, Kentucky, and Texas passed bills that allowed their officials to restrict the activities of financial institutions if they were determined to be limiting their dealings with the fossil-fuel or firearm industries. The lobbying arm of the Heritage Foundation, which has received funding from the billionaire Koch brothers and other allies of the fossil-fuel industry, is an enthusiastic supporter of such anti-E.S.G. endeavors. (Ramaswamy has appeared frequently at Heritage functions.) Heritage also has ties to the State Financial Officers Foundation, a group that includes conservative state treasurers and has promoted anti-E.S.G. efforts. Ramaswamy spoke to a gathering of the group this past February. A few months later, he was collaborating with one of its rising stars, Riley Moore, the West Virginia state treasurer, on a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed. The piece criticized the disproportionate power of the “big three” asset managers over public companies.

Moore told me that, after he took office in January, 2021, he heard that coal, gas, and oil companies with operations in his state were struggling because some banks had made it more difficult for them to borrow money. (He

declined to name any of the companies.) “I immediately started to dig in and wonder about how we could push back,” Moore said. West Virginia was one of the country’s largest energy producers, with some seventy-two thousand workers in the sector, and the industry generated millions of dollars in revenue for the state. Moore wrote to Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan, Wells Fargo, Morgan Stanley, BlackRock, and U.S. Bank, warning that they might lose state contracts should they be found to be boycotting fossil fuels.

“Everybody talks about climate change, and I get what they’re saying—maybe the climate is changing,” Moore said. “But it misses what’s measurably changing drastically in this country, and that is the question of human flourishing. We see people’s life expectancy dropping, drug addiction, people generationally doing worse than their grandparents or parents were doing. That is a huge problem, one that has to be addressed more immediately than the question of the climate changing. Here in West Virginia, that is a rich man’s problem.”

Moore added that today some West Virginia coal miners make ninety thousand dollars a year. Meanwhile, small towns and local businesses have been “gutted” by Walmart. “If they take our coal-mining jobs away in certain parts of this state, the only jobs we have left are in Walmarts,” he said. “And that’s not living.”

Some states that pass anti-E.S.G. legislation could face a new set of economic difficulties, according to a recent study by Daniel Garrett, an assistant professor of finance at Wharton, and Ivan Ivanov, a senior economist with the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago. They found that in Texas five banks paused or halted their underwriting of municipal bonds after anti-E.S.G. laws were adopted in September, 2021. The experts’ estimate suggests that a loss of competition in the market cost Texas municipalities an additional three to five hundred million dollars in interest on bonds in the first eight months.

Earlier this month, the anti-E.S.G. movement gained ground in unexpected territory. Vanguard withdrew from a large climate-finance alliance, the Net Zero Asset Managers Initiative, which aims to encourage fund companies to reach net-zero carbon targets by 2050. The company, which had been under pressure from Republican politicians, stated that it would track its own

climate progress instead. Critics immediately accused the company of giving in to the anti-woke movement. Ramaswamy filed the news away as another victory.

He was also gratified, this fall, by the response to a public letter he'd sent the C.E.O. of Chevron, urging him to reject calls by BlackRock and other institutional shareholders to reduce carbon emissions and to increase investments in renewable energy. When I met Ramaswamy for dinner one night in Manhattan at his favorite Mexican restaurant, he told me he'd be meeting later that evening with Chevron's C.F.O. Ramaswamy seemed exhilarated by the thought that he, like Larry Fink, could start telling business leaders what to do.

He'd been on a round of speaking engagements and was in the city with his body man to promote, among other things, a new book with a self-explanatory title: "Nation of Victims: Identity Politics, the Death of Merit, and the Path Back to Excellence." As he tore into a plate of quesadillas with huitlacoche, I asked Ramaswamy if his burgeoning reputation as a conservative firebrand had taken a personal toll. He chose his words carefully. A family member no longer spoke to him, and he'd been ghosted by a close friend. Although he'd forged new relationships with conservatives, none of the connections had turned into friendships. "I feel like the public advocacy, or whatever you call what I've been doing in the last couple of years, has eroded more friendships than new friendships made up for it," he said.

Although Ramaswamy delights in the visibility that his Fox News appearances bring, he wonders about the opportunities foreclosed. "I feel like I recoil when I see someone describe me as a conservative," Ramaswamy said. "Not that there's anything wrong with being a conservative. It's just not how I would describe myself."

Fear of the label did not stop Ramaswamy from travelling to Washington, D.C., a few weeks later to receive the Gentleman of Distinction Award at the annual gala of a right-leaning organization called the Independent Women's Forum. The unofficial theme of the event, which took place in the great hall of a museum, seemed to be outrage about transgender athletes in women's

sports. Still, the mood in the room was exuberant. The midterms were imminent, and Republicans were anticipating big gains.

Ramaswamy had flown in from an investment conference in Las Vegas, where he had been interviewed alongside Mike Pompeo, the former Secretary of State, at an event entitled "ESG for Thee, China for Me." Somewhere along the way, he had upgraded his footwear to black brogues, and when he took the stage he delivered a speech less folksy than the one he'd tried out months earlier, in Dublin. He shared his child-of-immigrants story; quoted Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr.; slammed E.S.G. and tech censorship; and then got to the self-mythologizing portion of the narrative—that he had stepped down from his company, where he'd been working to develop a cancer drug, to fight a new kind of cancer afflicting our culture.

"That is this new secular religion in America that says that your identity is based on your race, your gender, and your sexual orientation, full stop," he said. "That America is a systemically racist nation. That if you're Black you're inherently disadvantaged. That if you're white you're inherently privileged."

The following month, the Republicans' disappointing performance in the midterms led to furious intraparty debate over whether to remain loyal to Trump or to move on. But a point of consensus seemed to be that the quality of the Party's candidates mattered. After people started suggesting that Ramaswamy run for President, he found it hard to shake off the idea. Maybe he *was* the right person to unify the country around shared values—values that, at the D.C. gala, he underlined in a pounding conclusion.

"The idea that no matter who you are, or where you came from, or what your skin color is, that you can achieve anything you ever want in this country, with your own hard work, your own commitment, and your own dedication—that," he said, his voice soaring, "is the American Dream."

Moments later, he was engulfed by admirers. Frank Coleman, of the Cigar Association of America, who claimed that the F.D.A. was "trying to kill the industry" by threatening to ban flavored cigars, had never heard of Ramaswamy before, but said, "It was a tremendous speech." Tulsi Gabbard,

the former congresswoman and 2020 Presidential candidate who'd recently announced that she was leaving the Democratic Party, called Ramaswamy courageous. Mark Meadows, Trump's former chief of staff, used the same word. An hour later, Ramaswamy was still fielding well-wishers when he realized that he needed to get to the airport. It was wheels-up soon, and he had places to go. ♦

By Jelani Cobb

By Ian Crouch

By Andrew Marantz

By Dexter Filkins

Shouts & Murmurs

- **Elon Musk and His Band of Free-Speech Tweeters**

By Paul Rudnick

> **ELON MUSK@elonmusk**
> This is a battle for the future of civilization. If free speech is lost even in America, tyranny is all that lies ahead.
>
> *—Twitter, November 28, 2022.*

AngryWhiteMan@AlwaysRight
I am so ANGRY about everything I can barely finish my sandwich or my James Patterson paperback because of HUNTER BIDEN'S LAPTOP

MariahCareyIsJesus@MariahWillSaveUs
Mariah in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade: no words. Only inspiring, incandescent lip-synching and I don't care anymore that my boyfriend dumped me

ILoveElon@NotElon'sMother
Why isn't anyone mentioning how handsome Elon is when he's selflessly helping this nation it's like if George Washington and James Bond had a baby and homeschooled it

FeministMom@MomsRock
Until Moms are given longer naps and subsidized child care my mug will say Vote Like a Mom and I will post TikToks where I dance with two other Moms to Harry Styles because Moms Got It Mommin' On, I have trademarked this

KidsAmIRight@NewDadWon'tShutUp
Today my 3-month-old made a spit bubble and I thought, fuck my career in finance this is what matters. JK but would like a book deal does anyone have Ryan Reynolds' contact, he'd be perfect as me, I'm not the only one who says this

AngryWhiteMan@MyLaxativeHasStoppedWorking
Why is everyone so LAZY and ENTITLED especially young libs it makes me so angry I want a congressional investigation into Hillary hiding Hunter Biden's laptop in her NPR TOTEBAG which is a lib ASSAULT WEAPON

ElonIsMyHero@NotElon’sAssistant
Elon gives and gives and no one ever thanks him or names their children Elon even when the child might be his

SaneConservative@FreedomIsReal
Why can’t people read the Constitution and stay away from my parking space and the TV Guide with Yellowstone on the cover I accidentally left at the post office, yes I buy stamps like a man

JustMeCuzI’mEnough@PrioritizeMentalHealth
What if we all just thought about climate change while sharing pictures of meadows instead of calling me names like FlowerButt and You Idiot

AmericaOnly@DeSantisIsSoft
China is taking our jobs and watching us through our Apple products don’t say anything around your blender just pretend you’re fine LIKE THE LOSER YOU ARE

JustAKid@ThenWhyAmIOnTwitter
Wondering: is Twitter like Medicare bc it’s something my Nana does LOL except only Nana still uses LOL

LonelyGayMan@WritingABookAboutFilmsOfJuneAllyson
WHY AREN’T WE TALKING ABOUT FLORENCE HENDERSON’S STAGE CAREER

SocialistsSometimesGoOnDates@ShutUpWithYourNegativity
Message to the hot guy with the backpack and body odor working next to me in Bushwick community garden: I was the hottie in Crocs and the crop top made from ignored subpoenas you asked me if I was into fanfic where Chamalet uses crypto I can still smell you I am waiting near the compost

WorriedAboutMargotRobbie’sCareer@UsedToBeWorriedAboutNaomi Watts’sCareer
Margot needs to play more lawyers and scientists maybe with disabilities, I will get her that Oscar if she will listen

TheRealEliseStefanik@It’sReallyMe
I will power-wash your patio furniture and paint your guest bedroom if you will talk to me and not call me Alice

LovingMyLife@HowAboutYou
Showered, took the puppy to the park, called my Mom, had a bagel, life is good UNLESS YOU’RE HUNTER BIDEN’S LAPTOP FOOLED YOU AVOCADO BUTTHURT LIB

CrosswordAddict@RetiredAccountantAndChristmasMom
I’m not here to cause trouble but please learn the difference between they’re, their, and there before the nurse gets here with my meds ASSHOLE

ElonIsMyEverything@NotElonSobbingAndLashingOut
The Twitterverse will be a golden land of freedom if everyone will just give Elon a chance and all your money ARE YOU LISTENING TIM NOT-AS-RICH-AS-ELON COOK. Blue checks will cost more bc they are made from Elon’s tears

KindnessIsReal@ILoveEveryone
I hate people who are divisive, spreading misinformation and hate. What if we forget our differences? And if you disagree I hear you and respect you, and I hope you get run down by a truck filled with compassion and guns ♦

By Barry Blitt

By Meghana Indurti

By Eli Grober

By Barry Blitt

Tables for Two

- **A Mexican Restaurant Grows on Staten Island**

By [Hannah Goldfield]

The other day, at San Jeronimo Restaurant and Bakery, I did a double take when a server delivered the tamarind agua fresca I'd ordered. It came in a cartoonishly large beer stein, a volume three times what I'd expected and way more than I could drink—or so I thought. I'd also ordered a Molcajete 5 Carnes, a dish of sizzling meats (including a warmly spiced chorizo patty and a filet of steak pounded thin, fatty edges glistening), vegetables (silky whole green onions, tender spears of charred *nopal*, or cactus), and grilled *quesillo* (Oaxaca-style cheese), fetchingly fanned in a mortar carved from volcanic rock. For salsa, I'd opted for the *roja* (red); "*Pica*," the server warned. *Muy, muy picante*, as it turned out, *picantísimo*, even, as its kick came from chile de árbol, which is usually about five times hotter than a jalapeño. I made quick work of my jumbo drink.

In 1998, Antonio Marquez moved from Puebla, Mexico, to Staten Island. For almost fifteen years, he worked as a busser at an Applebee's and a TGI Fridays. In 2014, he and his daughter Sara Marquez-Sanchez opened a deli, Plaza San Jeronimo, in a neighborhood called Port Richmond, to serve the growing Mexican community. According to the 2020 census, nearly twenty per cent of Staten Island residents identify as Latino, up from twelve per cent in 2000; for Mexican immigrants, the borough has become an affordable alternative to areas like Bushwick and Sunset Park.



Antonio Marquez and his daughter Sara Marquez-Sanchez opened a deli called Plaza San Jeronimo in 2014. In 2020, the landlord of a large restaurant on the same block invited them to expand the business.

The deli is densely packed, with papalo (a cilantro-adjacent herb), guaje (the seedpods of the acacia tree), and *tuna* (prickly pear), shelves upon shelves of queso fresco, dozens of seasonings—including powdered avocado leaves harvested and sent by Marquez's mother, in Puebla—and even *chapulines*, or grasshoppers. In the back, cooks prepare dishes from a comprehensive menu of tacos, tortas, *guisados* (stews), and much more, for takeout or to eat in at a few tiny tables. In early 2020, the landlord of a large, and vacant, restaurant on the block invited Marquez and Marquez-Sanchez to expand.

Their lease began that February. The first year was incredibly challenging, Marquez-Sanchez told me. "It was very much a struggle trying to justify restaurant prices for takeout," she said. "The thing that ultimately helped us get through it was the *pan dulce*, the Mexican bread, made fresh."



For Sopes, fried patties of house-made masa are topped with refried beans, lettuce, tomato, sour cream, queso fresco, and a choice of meat.

After lunch, I filled a sack with *pan dulce*, lovely iterations of classics including *conchas* (soft rolls shaped like clamshells, some wearing neon-pink icing) and enormous *polvorones* (shortbread wedding cookies). On a Saturday, I came back for dinner, starting with a round of micheladas that arrived in margarita glasses, upside-down beer bottles affixed to their salted

rims with special plastic attachments. The straws were plugged with nubs of tamarind-chili candy: bite them out and let the party begin.

Marquez-Sanchez recommended the weekend-only *pollo a la brasa*, a half chicken marinated in adobo seasoning and grilled over wood, its glossy, sticky skin bearing a distinct note of smoke, a feast paired with yellow rice and refried beans or *ensalada de nopales*. Fat chunks of supremely velvety goat bobbed in *caldo de chivo*, a fragrant bowl of thin but rich red broth, brightened by a squeeze of lime and handfuls of chopped raw onion and cilantro, served with warm tortillas.



A range of house-baked cakes includes tres leches topped with strawberries.

The sweeping menu also includes fajitas; a torta Texana, layered with steak, chorizo, and jalapeños; a glorious quesadilla Tex-Mex, stuffed with *quesillo*, rice, beans, and a choice of meat, served with guacamole, sour cream, and a coarse pico de gallo. These dishes, Marquez-Sanchez explained, help differentiate the restaurant from the deli, but also, she said, “We’ve tried a lot of Tex-Mex food from other places, like Chevys or even Applebee’s. It’s very inauthentic, and so it’s, like, Can’t we just do it our way? Our Mexican food, Americanized.” *(Dishes $4.50-$26.)* ♦

An earlier version of this article misused phrases in Spanish.

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

The Musical Life

- **Beth Orton’s Deciduous Sound**

Beth Orton's Deciduous Sound

Before a show at Bowery Ballroom, the singer-songwriter takes a stroll through New York City's last old-growth woodland, in the Bronx.

By John Seabrook



Beth Orton, the British singer-songwriter, was in town recently to play songs from her new album, "Weather Alive," at Bowery Ballroom. The day before the show, she Ubered up to the New York Botanical Garden to visit the Thain Family Forest, the last remaining fifty acres of old-growth woodland left in New York City. Orton, a gamine-ish fifty-one, who lives with her family in London, had dressed sensibly for November in New York. The weather, however, was balmy, in the British and the American senses: seventy-five degrees and sunny, eerily resembling high English summer, except for the crunching of dead leaves underfoot.

Orton persuaded the guard at the garden's entrance to hang on to her wool coat and heavy sweater. ("Feel the weight of that," she said, handing them over.) Then she set off, with a loping stride ("Yes, I'm tall"), in search of a way into the primeval wood, where the footpaths follow those of the Leni Lenape, who hunted under the chestnut and hemlock trees that once

canopied the East Coast, before twentieth-century blights devastated those species.

“Weather Alive” is Orton’s first new music in six years, and a high point in a long career that took off like a bottle rocket in the nineties, with two genre-defying albums of “folktronica”—“Trailer Park,” in 1996, and “Central Reservation,” in 1999. Both records came out at the peak of the CD era, giving Orton unrealistic expectations about her future financial security. “But I hadn’t had a chance to figure out my place in my own music, in a way,” she said. “There was no readiness. It was just, ‘O.K., you’re a songwriter. Go.’ ”

A sign said that the Thain forest “remains a magnificent reminder of the resilience of nature in the face of complex human-caused disturbance.” “Old growth” is a slippery concept. It doesn’t necessarily mean old trees, although the Thain forest has its share of arboreal O.G.s. One thing that defines a forest as old growth, and the thing that made this one of special interest to Orton as a metaphor for her life in music, is its ability to renew itself.

“Weather Alive” emerged from a long dormant period, Orton said, owing to the human-caused disturbance of raising two children with her husband, the musician Sam Amidon. “That allowed me to grow and develop, and find that resilience,” Orton said, gesturing to the canopy overhead. “To learn what it is I do, in a way.”

Music was front and center in Orton’s own childhood in London, where she was the youngest of three: “My brothers were into punk—so the Clash and the Sex Pistols were important.” But punk led Orton, who began clubbing at age twelve, to ska, then to dub. “The dance floors of the eighties were where all the influences of the time met,” she said. “You’d hear New Order, Cocteau Twins, the Smiths, and Kraftwerk. And there was also Kate Bush: a liberated woman doing her thing. It was an incredible time.”

“ ‘Overlook this way,’ ” Orton said, reading another sign. “Always head toward the overlook.” She did.

The tracks on the new record are joined sonically as much as structurally, a trick Orton pulls off because she is both the writer and the producer. “I’ve

always been an editor," she said. Songs follow lengthy, winding paths through an old growth of strings and horns. Orton cited her lack of "intention" in recording the album as key to its success. "Making music with a kind of open intention has been an extraordinary lesson," she said wonderingly.

Some critics have heard in "Weather Alive" the sound of isolation, and called it a pandemic record. Actually, Orton said, "I felt less isolated" during lockdown. "What I liked about the pandemic was living in accordance with the most vulnerable."

A third sign marked the location of the very last eastern hemlocks in the woods, left from before the woolly adelgid, a species of aphid brought to the region by Hurricane Gloria, in 1985, ravaged the East Coast. Clearly, some degree of human stewardship is necessary to preserve the character of old growth, and perhaps to remedy human-caused climate change as a whole, Orton mused. "How much should we do to be the stewards of the planet? We haven't worked it out."

At last, Orton came to the overlook, an idyllic view of an unspoiled stretch of the Bronx River from a cliff high above: the last patch of Eden left in New York. Gazing out, she said, "It does feel like everything is up in the air right now, everything is turning over. There isn't a sodden thing on this earth that isn't in flux." She sighed and stretched out her arms in a way that seemed to include the warm day, the view, and the refrain from the album's title song:

> Almost makes me wanna cry
> The weather's so beautiful outside. ♦

By Françoise Mouly

By Alex Ross

By Daniel A. Gross

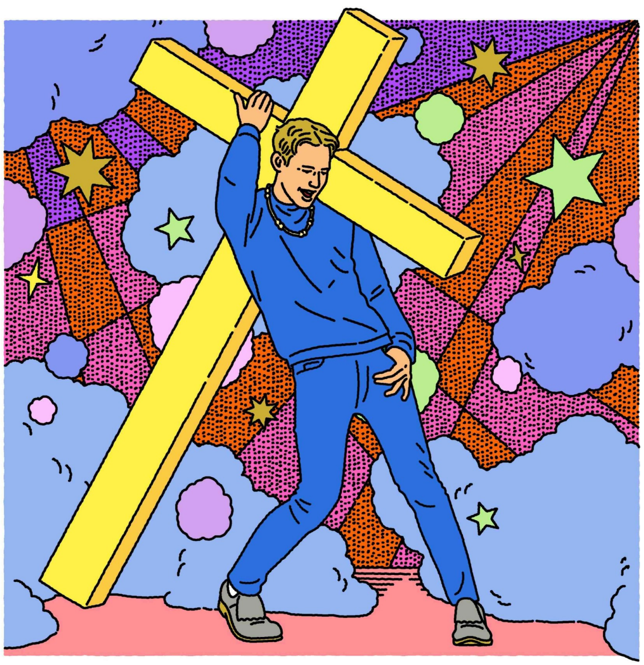
The Theatre

- **Teen-Age Religion, in “Your Own Personal Exegesis”**

Teen-Age Religion, in “Your Own Personal Exegesis”

A very funny, moving new play looks at the foibles of a Protestant youth group. Plus: Adrienne Kennedy’s Broadway début, with “Ohio State Murders.”

By Vinson Cunningham



God, it’s dark out. Going to plays these days is like looking at a painting by Jane Dickson, whose work chronicles an older, more dangerous, less commercially anesthetized Times Square. By the late afternoon, the palette of the street is all black sky and bright lights, neon reflected in smears on puddled pavement. In this slogging terrain, the lights of the theatre feel like promises of warmth to come. It’s nice to trudge inside, even in a gloomy mood, and warm your hands by drama’s hearth.

Julia May Jonas’s very funny, often moving new play, “Your Own Personal Exegesis,” directed by Annie Tippe at Lincoln Center’s Claire Tow Theatre, starts out at just this time of year. It’s Christmas Eve, at a church whose full name we never learn, in a more or less well-off, implicitly suburban town in New Jersey. “Redacted Church, in Redacted, New Jersey,” the church’s

youth pastor, Rev Kat (Hannah Cabell), calls it in a sermon. Those redactions, and others that pop up throughout the play's text—we never, for instance, learn any of the main characters' last names—give it the feeling of an ardent but guarded memory. The show and its author seem to want to both confess and protect, perform and be private, all at once.

What we can tell about the church, though, is that it's liberal and mainline Protestant. When Kat preaches, in her hokey style, she wears a jazzy mantle. The parishioners are respectable, restrained people who don't like to hear stuff about fire and brimstone from the pulpit on Sunday mornings. The play gains its energy and its structure by juicing comedy—another kind of masking redaction—from the foibles of people for whom religion is less a metaphysical horizon than a way to play social games. Jonas casts the audience as the adults of the congregation: audience members are given a pamphlet to keep up with the "service," and are sometimes conscripted into long passages of call-and-response as Kat leads the proceedings. Tippe's direction, along with Brett J. Banakis's subtle and efficient set, makes good use of the stage's similarity—in both function and design—to the pulpit.

Otherwise, the adults are mostly notable for their absence. All the other members of the cast play teens, full of keening intensity, who make up Kat's youth group. Chris (Cole Doman) is obviously Kat's favorite. He's a newish member of the church, full of adolescent piety and forlorn resentment toward his alcoholic dad. Those two elements, his sincere interest in God and his troubledness, push him into closer contact with Kat. Chris is clearly lost, and in certain ways quite dumb, but sometimes he speaks in long rafts of wise poetry that come to him seemingly unbidden. At first, he and Kat (who is described in Jonas's stage directions as "A Fully Adult Woman") share a convivial, tender mentor-pupil connection, but as the play unfolds the relationship takes on swiftly darkening shades of something stranger and far less appropriate.

Beatrice (Annie Fang) is the daughter of the church's organist. She's smart and good at singing, but she's nagged by constant doubts about God. When another girl, Addie (Mia Pak), tries to explain Jesus' status as the Son of God—fully fleshly and fully divine—as the meeting of horizontal and vertical lines at the overlapping center of a Venn diagram, Beatrice fisks the idea earnestly. "What about the spaces between the lines?" she asks.

Like if God is these vertical lines then
In order to see the Man show up?
There have to be spaces, right?
So what are the spaces?

Kat openly disparages Beatrice, either because of the girl's cleverness or because of her needling questions, dismissing her efforts at every turn and displaying a hostility that feels deranged given the authority the older woman holds. One of the graces of "Your Own Personal Exegesis" is the specificity with which it displays the irrationality and cruelty of insecure adults. It gradually becomes apparent that Beatrice—intelligent, observant, uncomfortable in her body—is the person who'll remember this time most clearly, and most harrowingly. She's the one doing the redacting in retrospect.

The play takes place over the course of a year—from Christmas Eve, 1995, to Christmas Eve, 1996—and takes its shape from the rhythm of the Christian liturgical calendar. We see the youth-group teens dancing, trancelike, at an amusing, sexually tense twenty-four-hour dance party; preparing, hilariously, for a Vietnam-themed adaptation of the story of David and Bathsheba; and making their preparations for Holy Week and Easter, when Chris will play Christ carrying his Cross. A deeply awkward young guy, Brian (Savidu Geevaratne), should've had the role, but as usual Kat is playing favorites.

Because of the episodic nature of the show, the occasional shallow orientation of the stage—the church portions are played at the edge of the proscenium—and Jeanette Oi-Suk Yew's deft, often dramatic lighting, the scenes, in their procession, feel like Stations of the Cross. And when Chris carries the Cross at Easter, with Kat playing the Virgin Mary, Yew's chiaroscuro captures all the weird ecstasy of their twisted relationship. Adding to this effect are moments when the members of the ensemble—they work together wonderfully throughout—break into lovely contrapuntal harmony, underscoring the play's heightened emotions and its feeling of unrealism.

At one point, the teens sing a favorite hymn of mine. "Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est," the first ancient line of Latin goes: "Where charity and love

are, there God is." Beatrice isn't sure about the God bit, but the wide arc of the show—from Advent to Advent, dark to dark—doubles down on the idea that somewhere in the deep shadows of memory there's often a ravishing spark. Maybe even just a laugh.

The last time I wrote about Adrienne Kennedy's masterwork "Ohio State Murders" was in January, 2021, when it was available digitally, as a staged reading, by Round House Theatre, in association with the McCarter Theatre Center. The play takes the form of a lecture: Kennedy's long-standing alter ego, Suzanne Alexander (Audra McDonald), is giving a guest speech at Ohio State University, about the roots of "the violent imagery in my work; bloodied heads, severed limbs, dead father, dead Nazis, dying Jesus." That premise, for what might have been a fairly dry talk, becomes a long, increasingly unthinkable story about Suzanne's time, many years before, at the university. It's a deeply verbal play—all of its action, including brief visitations by characters who emerge like unfurling smoke from Suzanne's memory, is spurred forward by her words. So it felt strangely natural—unlike most pandemic theatre—to watch it on a screen last year.

But now, seeing the play on Broadway, at the James Earl Jones, directed by Kenny Leon—this is Kennedy's inexplicably delayed Broadway début, at the age of ninety-one—I was enraptured by the production's management of darkness, fit to match the pitch-black tinge of its material. Around McDonald swirl bookshelves in spiral patterns, some of them suspended in air; this is a nightmare of haute literacy and higher learning. Behind her is what looks like a crevice in a rock formation, through which the audience sees an unrelenting blanket of falling snow.

Suzanne's story begins during her freshman year at Ohio State, in 1949, when she's taking an intro-level literature class, hoping to slip past the institution's de-facto system of segregation and earn her way into the English department. Her white professor Robert Hampshire (Bryce Pinkham) gets her hooked on Thomas Hardy's "Tess of the D'Urbervilles," and becomes intoxicated by the intelligence of her essays. The play is fixated on geography—the young Suzanne thinks often about the map of Hardy's rendering of Wessex, mentally superimposing it onto the campus where she studies in a Quonset hut and takes twisting paths that keep her separate from her white fellow-students. The first of the murders hinted at in

the play's title happens in a ravine that keeps being mentioned as a landmark.

That's a lesson: even our most verbal, word-obstructed memories—especially the horrific kind that "Ohio State Murders" spins around—are tied to the contingent conditions outside. Sometimes landscape and light are story enough. ♦

By Alex Ross

By Richard Brody

By Adam Gopnik

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